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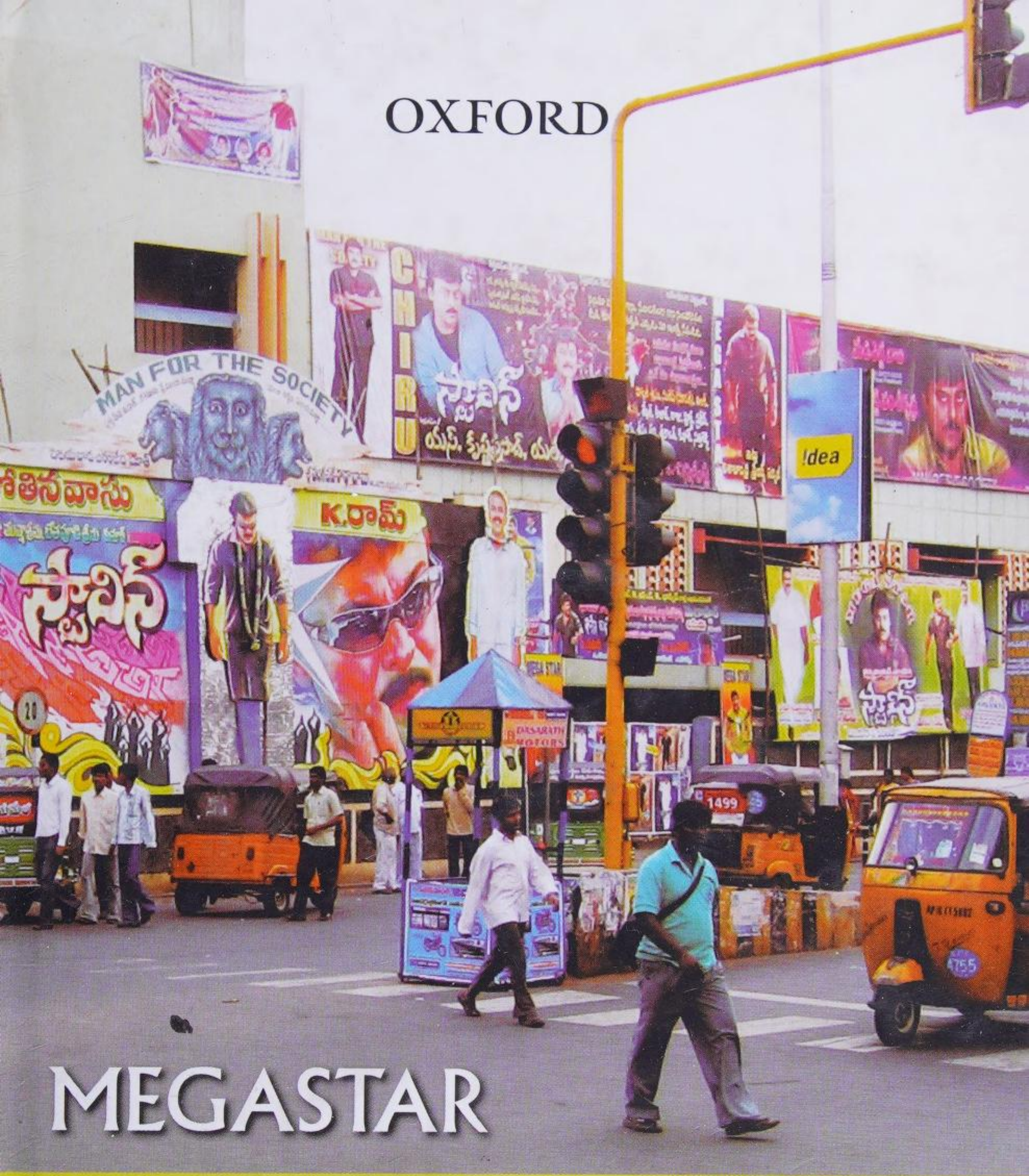

MEGASTAR

Chiranjeevi and Telugu Cinema after N.T. Rama Rao

S.V. Srinivas

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Chiranjeevi and Telugu Cinema after N.T. *Rama Rao*

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Chiranjeevi and Telugu Cinema after N.T. Rama Rao

S.V. Srinivas

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Published in India
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First published 2009

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ISBN-13: 978-0-19-569308-9
ISBN-10: 0-19-569308-6

Typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro 10.5/12.5
by Excellent Laser Typesetters, Pitampura, Delhi 110 034
Printed in India by Parangat Offset, New Delhi 110 020
Published by Oxford University Press
YMCA Library Building, Jai Singh Road, New Delhi 110 001

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Contents

Acknowledgements ix

Image Credits xi

List of Acronyms xii

Introduction xv

Part I

1. Whistling Fans and Conditional Loyalty 3

Part II

2. After NTR: Telugu Mass Film and Cinematic Populism 73

3. Rowdy-Citizen: He who knows his *Ganji* and *Benji* 129

4. Fans, Families, and Phantoms: *Alluda Majaka* Revisited 157

5. Remaking the Star to Make a Politician 189

Chiranjeevi's Filmography (Telugu, Hindi, and Kannada) 242

Notes 247

References 269

Index 281

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Chiranjeevi for agreeing to speak with me and also giving me access to priceless materials related to fan activity. A very warm thanks to Allu Aravind for helping me to reach Chiranjeevi and also his kind offer to host me during my stay in Chennai in the run up to my first interview with the star.

A lot of the material I examine here was made available by generous fans, film industry representatives, and old friends alike. I would like to thank everyone I cite in the book and in particular Allu Aravind for making available back volumes of *Megastar Chiranjeevi*; Chiranjeevi's office staff in Hyderabad for guiding me through a complex archive; R. Swamy Naidu for his help with materials and contacts; Ch. Venkateswara Rao for making the trip to Ongole possible; G.L.N. Reddy for alerting me to new material on Telugu cinema; A. Srinivasulu and K. Jagannath for help with 'field work' in Tirupathi and Madanapalle; S. Padmavathy of the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society (CSCS); and Media Archive for digitizing the print material reproduced in the book.

I am grateful to various people for their advice, comments, and criticism of earlier drafts and avatars of this book. Foremost in this list are my senior colleagues at CSCS. Tejaswini Niranjana has been most supportive during various stages of the script's evolution. Her interest in this project proved to be critical for me to develop my interest in the study of popular cinema. I am deeply indebted to Ashish Rajadhyaksha in more ways than I can elaborate here. To say the least, the central arguments of this book are a direct consequence of long conversations with him. My thanks to Madhava Prasad and Vivek Dhareshwar for asking difficult questions, which I have not fully addressed.

I would also like to thank my other colleagues at CSCS, especially Mrinalini Sebastian and Anup Dhar for their interest in my work and

engaging conversations on it; Ratheesh Radhakrishnan and T. Vishnu Vardhan for discussions on south Indian films and stars.

I have benefitted immensely from the support of a number of friends and fellow academics. I would like to thank in particular:

Ravi Vasudevan, Moinak Biswas, and Ravi Sundaram for their comments and feedback on early versions of the script's arguments, but also opportunities to test new arguments before indulgent audiences.

Ashwin Punathambekar for detailed comments on an earlier draft of Chapter 1.

My friends K. Murali, Rekha Pappu, K. Satyanarayana, and Uma Bhrugubanda for arguments on contemporary films and politics that have shaped this book.

Meaghan Morris and Stephen Chan for helping me think not only through questions related to stars and genres of Hong Kong cinema but, as it turned out, Telugu cinema as well.

Rachel Dwyer for persuading me to return to a book I failed to complete on two earlier occasions. Oxford University Press, New Delhi's two anonymous reviewers for their comments on the book proposal.

Earlier versions of the book's chapters were presented at the Department of Cultural Studies, Lingnan University, Sarai, CSDS; Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University; English and Foreign Languages University; and CSCS. I would like to thank the participants at these forums for their questions and comments.

This book incorporates some of the research I carried out as a Sephis Post-Doctoral Fellow (2001–2).

This is not quite the book I proposed to write as a visiting fellow at Asia Research Institute (ARI) of National University of Singapore. Nevertheless, a substantial part of the book was in fact written at ARI. My stay at ARI also allowed me to ask a set of new questions of familiar materials. I am grateful to the institution for the fellowship that came with the most fantastic facilities one could wish for. Many thanks to Chua Beng Huat for inviting me to ARI. I would also like to thank Kuan-Hsing Chen, my second big-brother, for evenings spent in discovering new places and cinemas. Nir, Hee-sun, and other colleagues of ARI's Cultural Studies Cluster were most encouraging. Amit, Alka, and Dipender made my stay in Singapore memorable.

Finally, my thanks to the members of my supportive family, my parents and Ananth, for helping me keep track of Chiranjeevi's progress, in addition to everything else; Anita and Gauri for the years they lost while I typed away my responsibilities.

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Figs 29, 30 from *Gharana Mogudu*, *Source:* New Volga Videos 96

DVD captures from *Big Boss* Segments I, II, and III,
Source: EVP International 113–15

DVD captures from *Big Boss*, *Source:* EVP International 124–7

DVD captures from *Gharana Mogudu*,
Source: New Volga Videos 151

Figs 36, 37, 38 from *Alluda Majaka*, *Source:* New Volga Videos 175–6

Fig. 39, *Source:* New Volga Videos 177

Figs 40, 41, *Source:* New Volga Videos 181

Fig. 44 from *Indra*, *Source*: Sri Balaji Video 224

Sequence from *Indra*, *Source*: Sri Balaji Video 227

Sequence from *Tagore*, *Source*: New Volga Videos 231

Frame capture from *Tagore*, *Source*: New Volga Videos 231

Frame capture from *Stalin*, *Source*: Aditya Music 234

Frame capture from *Stalin*, *Source*: Aditya Music 235

Frame capture from *Stalin*, *Source*: Aditya Music 235

Frame capture from *Stalin*, *Source:* Aditya Music 237

Acronyms

AA	Allu Aravind
ABVP	Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad
ACF	Anti Corruption Forum
AKRAS	Akhila Karnataka Rajkumar Abhimanigala Sangha
ANR	Akkineni Nageswara Rao
APCLC	Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee
APFFA	Andhra Pradesh Film Fans' Association
ARI	Asia Research Institute (National University of Singapore)
BJMM	Bharatiya Janata Mahila Morcha
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BSP	Bahujan Samaj Party
CBFC	Central Board of Film Certification
CCF	Chiranjeevi Charitable Foundation
CO	Chiranjeevi Office
CSCS	Centre for the Study of Culture and Society
CSDS	Centre for the Study of Developing Societies
DMK	Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam
EC	Examining Committee
FA	Fans' Association
FDC	Film Development Corporation
FFFA	Fair Films Fans' Association
INC	Indian National Congress
MGR	M.G. Ramachandran
NRI	Non-Resident Indian
NTR	N.T. Rama Rao
POW	Progressive Organization of Women
PPHP	Publics and Practices in the History of the Present

PRP	Praja Rajyam Party
RC	Revising Committee
SIO	Students' Islamic Organization
SWCYWA	State Wide Chiranjeevi Youth Welfare Association
TDP	Telugu Desam Party
VIRSAM	Viplana Rachaiytala Sangham

Introduction

An obvious starting point for this book is the spectacular launch of Chiranjeevi's Praja Rajyam Party (PRP) in Tirupathi on 26 August 2008. The event was replete with symbolism. The Hindu pilgrim centre of Tirupathi, in these days of bitter regional rivalries, is the one place that can pass off as the city of the Telugus, regardless of their place of origin. It is also the city where the Telugu film star turned politician N.T. Rama Rao (NTR) concluded his marathon election campaign just over a quarter century ago. Large cut outs of Gandhi, Ambedkar, Phule, and Mother Teresa framed the giant television screen that served as the backdrop to the stage. Incidentally, but perhaps not coincidentally, 26 August is the birthday of Mother Teresa.

Four crore rupees were reported to have been spent to organize the three hour event which included stage performances and was telecast live by satellite on Telugu and Kannada channels. Political opponents, however, alleged that the actual figure was many times this amount. The renowned cinematographer Chota K. Naidu oversaw the television crews even as helicopters hovered over the crowd that was estimated to have been between four to ten lakh strong.

The stage performances in praise of Chiranjeevi and even the star's faltering speech outlining his personal history and his party's policies were frequently disrupted. Through the early part of the programme, while the crowd grew increasingly restive in its anticipation of the star's arrival by helicopter, the pre-recorded songs, blaring through the public address system, were repeatedly interrupted by the organizers pleading with 'the Babu in the yellow shirt', and 'the boy in the blue *banian*' to please stop climbing barricades, generator sets, and platforms. Chiranjeevi's speech too was interrupted by the chief organizer and the

star's younger brother Nagendra Babu, using the public address to yell instructions at technicians because a generator set had apparently tripped due to the weight of people sitting on it. The fans, unruly as always, had come in the package deal called Praya Rajyam. How a star and his mammoth association of fans evolved into a machine capable of fighting elections is a subject of this book. Fan-control has been an issue for the star who tried to address it in a number of ways since the late 1980s. It is not in the least surprising that the problem was now being carried over to his election campaign.

Another issue to emerge at the Tirupathi meeting was the striking centrality of cinema to the star's political campaign. I am not referring to the dancers and the helicopters or anything else that journalists term as *filmi* when referring to theatricality. Chiranjeevi, like NTR before him, has made it a point to seek *political support* on the strength of his *screen career*. During his first media conference on 17 August 2008 (in Hyderabad) and subsequently in Tirupathi, Chiranjeevi made frequent references to his film roles, presumably to suggest that they contained his political agenda and demonstrated his commitment to the people as well as his leadership qualities. But that was not all. The promotional video released at Tirupathi, telecast live and also shown on the large screen on the stage, for the most part consisted of a compilation of clips from his films. The industry's biggest star and aspiring Chief Minister of the state was standing before the crowd in person, yet the crowd was being called upon to watch his screen persona through his film clips. In essence, the video had transformed even those attending the meeting, let alone the television viewers, into spectators of screen images.

What do we make of this star and his fans? And this incredible exercise of addressing potential voters as if they were his *fans*, asking them to vote for him because they like his films? It is possible that the star was under the impression that the electorate, or at least sections of it, would not be able to make a distinction between films and reality. The question before me, however, is how the star's screen career and its socio-political and film-industrial contexts add up (or not). I am acutely aware of the fact that I am asking the question after 'influence' has proved to be an ineffective template to mount an explanation.

This book will focus on the career of Chiranjeevi to ask the extent of the play and reach of cinema in our lives, in Andhra Pradesh, other places in India, and even beyond. Chiranjeevi, born Konidela Shivashankar Varaprasad and popularly known as Chiru and Megastar, is the most

popular star to have emerged after NTR's exit from the industry. His career has clear parallels with that of Rajnikant in Tamil cinema. Both stars were centres of hitherto unprecedented fan activity and began their careers in low-budget films, initially playing a variety of roles that gave little indication of the kind of screen personae they would develop over the years. Neither was considered a paragon of male beauty, unlike the top stars of the earlier generation. Rajnikant is the more famous and successful of the two but it is Chiranjeevi who has first decided to make his much-anticipated entry into politics, reversing the general trend of Telugu cinema and its stars drawing inspiration from their Tamil counterparts. Chiranjeevi's film career coincides with an important phase in the political history of Andhra Pradesh. Not the least because he began acting in 1978, when post-Emergency realignment of forces began to crystallize in the state. His most important early success came in 1983 with *Khaidi*, the same year when NTR was elected as Chief Minister.

This book covers the thirty-year period between 1978, when Chiranjeevi began his career, and 2008, when he announced the formation of the Praja Rajyam Party. While examining the star's films and fans, this book looks obliquely at a period of tremendous political churning in Andhra Pradesh to ask not only what the cinema had to say about these times, but more importantly, what the cinema's material contribution to the productive turmoil of the period has been. I argue that the cinema was far from incidental to the conflicts of this time. What film-industrial and socio-political issues/problems Telugu cinema and its biggest stars were working out, is a question that this study hopes to bring into the discussions of the contemporary.

In the period under consideration, NTR, the politician, rose, fell, and died (in 1996). Electoral politics was transformed by the challenge to the Indian National Congress (INC) party's domination, not only by the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) but also by NTR's style of campaigning. NTR's campaign was founded on a performance that was acutely aware of its own importance for mass mobilization. His rhetorical speeches, bodily gestures, and get-up, which changed from khaki to saffron in the early years of his political career highlighted the theatrical, and even though condemned as pure histrionics, the star, nevertheless, staked his political career on it. With NTR, Andhra Pradesh could be said to have fully and properly transited into the age of mass mobilization. However, the film star-politician was not the only one in the business. This was a period when a number of new constituencies were being formed, even

as the older ones were being transformed. The Naxalites, or the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) factions, grew phenomenally after the Emergency and in the 1990s, they virtually ran parallel governments in parts of the state. Emergency and post-Emergency repression on the Naxalite movement threw up the most vibrant civil liberties movement in the country. The Dalit movement, as we know it today, emerged in the second half of the 1980s, at least, in part, as a response to the dominance of upper caste peasants under NTR's rule. Around this time, the independent women's movement became prominent. And then came the Mandal-Kamandal agitations. To talk of Chiranjeevi, then, is to argue about the interpretation of our present.

The Telugu film industry is the second largest in India. The little that is known about Telugu cinema outside Andhra Pradesh and its immediate neighbourhood, is often limited to its mythological films and the stars, namely N.T. Rama Rao and more recently, Chiranjeevi. In 1982, N.T. Rama Rao, the industry's biggest star, established his own political party named Telugu Desam Party, and went on to become the first non-Congress Chief Minister of the state in 1983. Now, Chiranjeevi, who, I will argue, is in many ways an inheritor of the NTR legacy, has ended 15 years of speculation by launching his political party. This legacy cannot be reduced to the ability to draw crowds or win elections.

A study of Telugu cinema cannot but note that much is shared by south Indian cinemas in general, and Telugu and Tamil industries, in particular. NTR's decision to enter politics, hints of which were first made by the star in 1980, was no doubt influenced by M.G. Ramachandran's (MGR's) election as Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu in 1977. Prior to this, the *hero-dwayam*, the star-twosome as Telugu journalists called them, NTR and Akkineni Nageswara Rao (ANR), had begun to perform high profile charitable actions modelled on their Tamil counterparts, MGR and Sivaji Ganesan.

While the parallels between the three major south Indian stars MGR, NTR, and the Kannada star Rajkumar, were first pointed out by Chidananda Das Gupta (1991), it was not until M. Madhava Prasad's work (1997 and 1999) that the need for a comparative perspective on the developments in the Madras film industry was noted by film scholars. Prasad's work was anticipated by Rajadhyaksha and Willemen (1994 rpt. 1999), who drew attention to the tendency of Madras based production companies and studios to make multiple language versions

of films from the late 1940s. Madras was then home to all the four major south Indian cinemas. From the 1950s, the one major change that was noticeable in the different versions of a multilingual production, was its male lead, as if the male star alone was capable of defining the product as being Telugu, Tamil, or Kannada. After 1956, when linguistic states were formed, the non-Tamil industries came under increasing political pressure, even as they were lured by state government incentives to begin the long-drawn process to relocate to their 'home' states. The Telugu film industry completed this process only in the late 1990s.[1] Prasad argues that the Madras film industry, starting from the 1950s, threw up a generation of stars, namely the star troika comprising MGR, NTR, and Rajkumar, who gradually emerged as authority figures on screen and representatives of their linguistic communities off-screen (1999: 41).

In spite of Prasad's persuasive argument, journalistic as well as academic writings on the cinema tend to make two incorrect assumptions. The first is to suppose that each cinema of this region constitutes an exception. Nowhere is this more frequently heard than in reference to Malayalam cinema, which we are repeatedly told, is *not* like Tamil cinema (or other Indian cinemas, let alone south Indian). The other is that there is only one story to be told in these parts, and it has to do with Tamil cinema. While I do not have the linguistic and other competencies to make a comparative study of south Indian cinemas in general, this book proceeds with the assumption that every development that I identify as significant for Telugu cinema is likely to have parallels in the region and at times also with Bombay's cinemas.

Nevertheless, there are a set of questions that are sharply posed by Telugu cinema and its megastars, especially NTR and Chiranjeevi. But the investigation of the specificity of Telugu cinema is in no way aided by the assumption of its uniqueness or derivative status. Furthermore, unlike explorations of the cinema-politics' linkages in Tamil Nadu, this book will steer clear of debilitating *a priori*, formulations that have at times reduced complex issues to a linear narrative which typically begins with the non-Brahmin movement in the early twentieth century and ends with M.G. Ramachandran (extendable to Jayalalithaa and Vijaykanth with minor revisions). By moving away from Tamil cinema, there is an outside chance that we can reinterpret that story too.

The (researchable) problem, this book will suggest, is *not* the use of cinema for propaganda purposes, or, for that matter its influence on gullible masses. No doubt cinema has been and continues to be deployed

for propaganda or spreading 'awareness' in many parts of the world in the fond hope that its messages rub off on its viewers. However, if MGR or NTR have to be discussed against the backdrop of propaganda films at all, it is only to note that these stars, as Robert Hardgrave Jr. (1973) and K. Sivathamby (1981) point out with reference to the former, rose to prominence *after the phasing out* of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) propaganda films. Hardgrave has this to say about the shift: 'Displacing content as the thrust of the DMK's use of the film media, the party now sought to emphasize star popularity as a vehicle for political mobilization. The DMK now hitched its political wagon to the stars of the silver screen' (1973: 294). The closest Telugu cinema came to the propaganda film was the 'progressive' social from the late 1930s, which is believed by film critics to have become more or less extinct by the mid-1960s. Moreover, NTR and Chiranjeevi give the overwhelming impression of virtually having stepped off the screen to launch political parties. Unlike MGR, who had a long history of involvement in politics before he decided to either contest elections or start his own party, the two Telugu stars in question had no prior political experience. In fact, Chiranjeevi went on make something of a production of his political inexperience soon after establishing his party. The making of star-politicians, an examination of Telugu cinema suggests, may not have anything to do with the propaganda value of their films or a prior history of the use of cinema in political campaigns.

In Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka, we witness a remarkable and rare degree of intimacy between cinema and politics. Historically speaking, this intimacy was among the important reasons for scholarly interest in the cinema of this region. Telugu cinema allows us to see that this intimacy cannot be explained away as a consequence of formations or movements that precede the cinema and whose ideas are reflected (or distorted) by the cinema. It is necessary to explain the cinema-society-politics relationship by pointing to the *work* of the cinema.

The cinema is a public institution that facilitates a range of transactions, which, in parts of India—Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and, to a certain extent, Karnataka—have extended into electoral mobilization. An example of the cinema's publicness, extending into, but not limited to, electoral politics, is provided by film stars' fans' associations. The historian Janaki Nair (2005) shows how important fans of the Kannada film star Rajkumar have been to Bangalore city's politics since

the 1980s although the star never contested an election. As such, the fans' association is a uniquely south Indian phenomenon. These associations have achieved a degree of organization, complexity, and visibility that is unparalleled in other parts of India. Groups of young *men*, often lower caste and lower middle class in origin, form associations that are avowedly dedicated to promoting particular stars through a variety of activities. Fan activity could have been read as evidence of mass manipulation by the star or film industry if it was not for the overwhelming evidence of its autonomy from centralized control. Their activities, which are not always approved of by the stars who are presumably being promoted through them, could include participation in caste, linguistic, or electoral mobilization. Or they could, and for the most part do, consist of a variety of fairly trivial, if somewhat rowdy, activities centred on film-viewing and the cinema hall. The connection between the self-evidently political and the strikingly trivial is not easily explained.

Studies of the fan phenomenon in Tamil Nadu (Hardgrave Jr. and Neidhart 1975 and Sara Dickey 1993) drew the attention of academics to the social composition and activities of fans. My intention is not merely to supplement the information these studies provide, but to explore what the phenomenon might have to do with cinema in the first place. I have also used the fan phenomenon as a starting point to investigate stardom of the south Indian variety. Its distinctive features include the difficulties these larger than life stars, whose cut-outs are routinely bathed in gallons of milk, have in deviating from their carefully cultivated screen images. The biggest of these stars, for example, simply cannot die on screen. There is the famous story of how MGR, who was planning to play Jesus Christ, wanted to change the story of the Bible to have his character fight back instead of being crucified. Anecdotes apart, as a number of scholars including M.S.S. Pandian (1992) and Prasad (1999) have noted, these stars exert a high degree of control over various aspects of film production and the film industry in general. These stars are known to direct and produce their own films, have substantial investments in production infrastructure (such as studios), own or control production companies, distribution networks, and exhibition outlets. Of late, they have expanded the scope of their investments to the ownership of media companies and television channels.

This book is an attempt to understand one such star, his fans, and the socio-political and film industrial context that produced him. What might the *question* be with specific reference to Chiranjeevi and in what disciplinary location should this be housed?

Academic writing on Indian cinemas is a growing industry today. For decades now, the body of literature has included studies by scholars who locate themselves within an established disciplinary field (History, Political Science, Psychology, Anthropology, Geography, Law, Urban Studies, etc.). For such scholars cinema provides materials for addressing issues thrown up by their respective disciplines. Although they may have limited interest in the cinema's status as a cultural-industrial form that is encountered in particular ways and has evolved historically in certain ways, etc., their work has served to extend what was hitherto understood as the frontiers of the cinema as field of study. Indian cinema has proved to be of interest to scholars researching urban history (Nair 2005), popular religion (Das 1980, Lutgendorf 2002, and Dwyer 2006), and legal scholars (Liang et al. 2007) alike. These studies suggest that the discipline of Film Studies is marginal to the academic interest in the cinema.

In the Indian context, Film Studies has a negligible presence in the university system. The only department of Film Studies in the country was established in 1993 in Jadavpur University, Kolkata. The emerging discipline is and has been identified with the work of a handful of individuals spread across the country. Of late, students of Indian cinema located in other countries appear to have outnumbered those located in India.

While I hope this book will contribute to Film Studies discussions, I would like to point out that within the discipline itself questions thrown up by the film industry, modes of circulation, and reception of films continue to remain marginal while the celebration of Bollywood, on occasion accompanied by elaborately staged discoveries of the banal, continue to be the flavours of the decade. I am also concerned about the inability of Film Studies to ask questions that other disciplines can take seriously, especially at a time when cinema is being studied in other disciplines. My best-case scenario for Film Studies is its *mainstream-ing*. I do not see this resulting from a rapid increase in the number of university departments but by entering into a productive dialogue with other human sciences.

Let me suggest provocatively that the missing element in the analyses of the socio-cultural and political manifestations of the cinema—such as the fan club, the star-politician, the religious cult, etc.—is the cinema itself. To this day, political scientists studying southern India can *afford* to be innocent of the existence of theories of stardom. That is the

extent to which Film Studies is irrelevant to the understanding of cinema's consequences.

In the course of this book, I draw on a few film theoretical concepts and discussions to examine domains and phenomena that have, for the most part, been 'owned' by social scientists and disowned by Film Studies: filmviewing, in general, and the fans' association, in particular. But my more important debt to Film Studies lies in my attempt to provide a *textual* grounding to what appear to be issues that are fully accounted for by other sources and materials. This is not to be confused with obsessing over individual scenes or shots, or worse, retelling film stories. I begin the book with fans in order to start with the social life of cinema: the point where Film Studies generally sets off and goes on to build an argument around the fan-star relationship as well as stardom in general as being inscribed in filmic texts. How to read these texts and what to look for in films that are so much like each other are questions I take up in some detail. Some years ago, in an ironic but happy development, distribution and exhibition became an important focus of the largest intellectual project investigating cinema in India, under the aegis of Sarai New Media Initiative, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), New Delhi. The project was titled Publics and Practices in the History of the Present (PPHP).[2] I have had the opportunity to engage with the researchers associated with the project. I hope this book will contribute to the discussion of how questions arising from the circulation of cinema can be taken back to the analysis of films themselves.

Indian cinema, like everything else about India, is easily touted as being an exception—not only to Hollywood but also to cinema, as the world, in general, has known it. Our films, our stars, and our responses to the cinema are presumed to be different, and even within this universe of exceptions, Telugu cinema (or Tamil, Kannada, and Malayalam, for different reasons) is an exception. Let me suggest, instead, that some immodesty may be in order for students of Indian cinema to move beyond the frame of being an exception: a theory that does not account for all Indian cinema, is no theory at all. After all, we are aware of the status of the Indian film industry as the most prolific one in the world. What we may be better off working towards is a better theory, not a special one.

While Chiranjeevi's political entry certainly helps focus attention on the questions at hand, I do not wish to suggest that the only reason

for studying Telugu cinema is its ability to produce star-politicians. Even if Chiranjeevi had not decided to form a political party, the questions his career throws up would have remained as also that of Telugu cinema's links with politics. In my attempt to understand such manifestations of this linkage, such as the star-politician and fan clubs of film stars, I will propose that Telugu cinema is *foundationally populist*. The argument about what I call cinematic populism may, given the required competence, be extended to other cinemas. But the argument stands or falls on the strength of what I have to say about the films I examine, and not on the happy coincidence that the star in question decided to contest elections. A number of film stars have contested elections in the past four decades in different parts of the country. Very few of them have had significant political careers and, for the most part, their film careers were only useful as incidental sources of fame. Nothing distinguishes the average star-politician from cricketers, television celebrities (small screen Sitas and Ravans alike), or scions of colonial princelings, who have been in the fray because some party or the other believes that their recognition value, 'face value' as we call it in Telugu, brings votes.

What I would like to underscore is something else and the numbers game does not help beyond a point. Telugu cinema's populism is no doubt evident from its ability to produce charismatic authority figures who are capable of leading the masses *because they are not like them* and are instead marked by superiority and distinction. However, this level of its populism is interesting to note but not an adequate reason to study the cinema. In fact, as political scientists would have it, the star-politician is but an instrument of interest groups which pre-exist the star himself. The Kamma caste had found a convenient mobiliser in NTR, and now it is the turn of the numerically larger Kapu caste which has found its NTR in Chiranjeevi. To this approach, I can add a footnote on the political economy of the film industry: it has been and continues to be an industry of the non-Brahmin, upper caste peasants. They brought their money from agriculture, moneylending, trade, and bootlegging to make films, establish production infrastructure, build cinema halls, and set up distribution networks. They also selected men from their castes to act in films. In this larger scheme of things, between the Reddy, Kamma, and Kapu communities, there are but minor differences and friendly contradictions. The Telugu upper caste peasant foundations of the film industry deserves a full-length study and I will leave this issue out of this book with the note that nothing in

post-NTR Telugu cinema suggests there has been an end, or even a serious challenge, to their total domination.

Staying with populism, it is not even a consequence of the banal fact that films (here and in other parts of the world) revolve around themes that allegedly appeal to lower class audiences. No one needs to read a book to figure this out. I will show how Telugu films can give the impression that they exist for the spectator and unfold according to spectatorial injunction: Things happen on screen because and only because I want them to. Film theory has had something to say about such a spectatorial relationship to the cinema, which I will argue is what, among other things, makes cinema populist. The fans' association is the institutional site for nurturing this relationship and also extending it beyond film viewing.

Insofar as politics involves a performative dimension, as is amply clear from the careers of NTR and Lalu Prasad Yadav alike, discussions of spectatorship might help us understand public life better, especially at a time when television mediates everything from election campaigns to parliament proceedings. With specific reference to Telugu cinema, a constellation of factors results in a situation when spectatorial pleasures—of the kind that has us flocking to the cinemas—acquire socio-political significance. So when Chiranjeevi reminds the electorate of its love for his *films*, I hear him saying, 'I made you laugh and cry because you wanted me to. Now I am here, for you and because of you'. Will I vote for him? Maybe or maybe not. The choice is nevertheless framed as if spectatorial pleasures are at issue.

I will arrive at the book's central argument via a detour of Bollywood and Bollywoodization. In August 2008 I discovered, without much surprise, that Amazon.com had 2700 odd 'books' on Bollywood. Not all of these are academic in nature and we also need to discount the possibility of the term Bollywood appearing in books and multimedia products on topics unrelated to the cinema. Nevertheless the point of contrast is the results thrown up for Telugu cinema: only thirty occurrences of the phrase 'Telugu cinema' could be found. Bhojpuri cinema had three.

My point is *not* that far too many people are studying Hindi/Bombay cinema. Neither am I lamenting under-representation of the fine cinemas of the south or the rest of the country. There can be no objection to the study of Bollywood or Bollywoodization as a *cultural-industrial phenomenon*. Indeed this book will argue that the understanding of this phenomenon is considerably enhanced by taking

the problem posed by Bollywoodization beyond Hindi cinema. Ashish Rajadhyaksha (2003) makes the crucial distinction between the culture industry called Bollywood and the Indian film industry.

> ... Bollywood is not the Indian film industry, or at least not the film industry alone. Bollywood admittedly occupies a space analogous to the film industry, but might best be seen as a more diffuse cultural conglomeration involving a range of distribution and consumption activities from websites to music cassettes, from cable to radio. If so, the film industry itself—determined here solely in terms of its box office turnover and sales of print and music rights, all that actually comes back to the producer—can by definition constitute only a part, and perhaps an *alarmingly small* part, of the overall cultural industry that is currently being created and marketed (p. 27, original emphasis).

Rajadhyaksha goes on to identify the problem as one of '*defining culture economically*' (2003, original emphasis). Indian cinema, much more than radio or television, he argues, has been characterized by its 'resistance to industrialization' that is manifest in such familiar difficulties as 'defining a production line and thus defining a stable channel of capital inflow' (p. 31).

This book will argue that contemporary Telugu cinema has, notwithstanding the sustained efforts by sections of the film industry and the visible signs of Bollywoodization (such as, the entry of corporate players into the production, distribution, and exhibition sectors), has repeatedly encountered a *blockage*, something that prevents it from being Bollywoodized, from seeing through the logic of commodification of culture. I borrow the notion of blockage from Paul Willemen (2002: 167–86) who used the term to refer to the difficulties that Korean cinema faced in reaching international audiences but, more importantly, the impossible situations and unsolvable problems that frequently arose in individual films leading to narrative dead-ends. Willemen goes on to explore the relationship between the blockage of Korean films in their journey to overseas markets and the blockage within Korean cinema. In Telugu cinema the blockage has industrial and textual manifestations which in turn involve multiple players.

There can be no doubt that Telugu cinema too is being dispersed into multiple sites of consumption and also transformed it into a range of commodities—ringtones, remixes, 'items' such as songs, comic sequences, etc. that can be distributed and consumed independently of the film itself. In the new order of things, there has been a gradual downgrading of the cinema hall's importance for the economics of a film. Notwithstanding any of these developments, Telugu cinema

today finds itself in a situation where yesterday's solutions cause today's problems.

The Telugu film industry produces star-politicians and fan clubs *instead* of profits. Film stars, the biggest male stars of the industry, are the embodiments of the problem-solution of Telugu cinema. During the thirty year period this book covers (1978–2008), the biggest stars of Telugu cinema were engines for the phenomenal growth of the industry. NTR exited the industry in 1983 as the most commercially viable Telugu star, not merely the most expensive one. His discovery of a political calling was perfectly timed in that a new generation of stars was rapidly 'invented' to facilitate further expansion of the industry. Although he was not solely responsible, he was nevertheless instrumental in creating a production regime, a narrative form, and a model of stardom—centred on routine excesses of fans' associations which included 'rigging' the box office through bulk purchase of tickets when collections began to drop—that sections of the industry have struggled hard to replace from the mid-1990s. This was around the time when early moves towards Bollywoodization began to be made in Bombay. Blocking the move towards Bollywoodization, or away from the extant order, and rendering such a move unnecessary, was the Telugu superstar. When such a star enters politics it cannot but have far reaching consequences, especially against the backdrop of his investment in the industry and the status quo. Is it the case that such megastars exit into politics when they are redundant for the industry?

In short the questions that Rajadhyaksha's notion of Bollywoodization throws up are too important to be left to Hindi cinema experts.

The Book

Prasad argues, '... political representation is not effected through acts of election or delegation, but through *substitution*, i.e., through the unexpected arrival of a figure who seems to be endowed with the legitimacy to represent us' (1999: 46). In the following chapters, I track the career of Chiranjeevi to show how he emerged as a representative figure, and also suggest that his exit from the film industry into politics was virtually written into his very stardom itself. So much so that the question of his success or failure in politics pales into relative insignificance against the backdrop of the evolving relationship between cinema and politics. Notwithstanding any interest group politics or ideological intent that we can read into Chiranjeevi's career, be it his films, his relationship with his fans, and the careful production

of a leadership figure on- and off-screen, I will argue that one of the problems thrown up by Telugu cinema and its stars is that of redundancy. Stars from NTR to Chiranjeevi helped create new markets and new modes of and spaces for the consumption of the cinema but their ability to do this was accompanied by the blockage of both formal as well as economic possibilities that were opened up, in part as a consequence of their own careers. In the mid-1990s, a moment of crisis was reached when the star, and the business model built around him that had helped the industry grow rapidly for decades, proved to be inadequate to address new challenges. A reexamination of that moment reveals that the film industry was critically *dependent* on politics to overcome its crisis. From that moment, the anticipated, deferred crossover of Chiranjeevi into politics became a framing device for holding his oeuvre together. New variants of older genres could now be made to showcase the star-politician, who was not merely a person but an evolutionary stage as far as stardom was concerned. More importantly, politics was going to be the eventual site for rehabilitating Telugu superstars: the source of the cinema's blockage.

The first part of the book, comprising the long first chapter, deals with fans' associations and their response to the cinema. Fans themselves speak of their relationship to their idols in terms of loyalty, devotion, etc., giving the impression that their actions have to do with extant ways of relating to social superiors and gods. In my examination of the fan-star relationship, I emphasize the conditional nature of the fan's loyalty to the star. The fan is a loyal follower and devotee only if the star lives up to the expectations the fan has of him. The conditional loyalty of fans is premised on the star's recognition of their well defined set of entitlements related to him and his films. This results in a situation in which fans become the guardians of the star's image and resort to drastic actions in his name. The fan-star relationship has been one of the key sources of Telugu cinema's blockage because, among other things, there can be strong and at times violent reactions to the exploration of new narrative possibilities in star vehicles. The problems thrown up by fan activity result in sustained exercises by the star to discipline fans. Interestingly, the solution envisaged by Chiranjeevi came in the form of reimagining the fan as a political cadre. As if the fan, like the star himself, had to be relocated in the domain of politics to resolve a problem thrown up by the cinema.

In the second part of the book I discuss the films of Chiranjeevi, taking up the questions thrown by my examination of fan activity. If

fan response is indeed a response to the films watched by fans, and I argue that it is, what do these films tell us about fandom and its investments in the star? In Chapter 2, I discuss a 'genre' locally known as the mass film to explore this question. The Telugu mass film has served as the vehicle, indeed produced, a whole generation of post-NTR stars. It is also the genre around which fans' associations grew to hitherto unprecedented levels in Andhra Pradesh. In Chapters 2 and 3, I discuss the work of Chiranjeevi between 1978 and 1995, focusing mostly on the mass films he featured in after the landmark film *Khaidi* (1983). In order to make my argument about the mass film as the genre that led Telugu cinema to the mid-1990s crisis, I refer to the work of other stars, including Balakrishna, NTR's son and Chiranjeevi's closest competitor. The mass film highlights the presence of the star within the fiction, even as the characters he plays grow to superhuman proportions over the years. Why should the spectator be constantly reminded that she/he is in the presence of a star? I analyse the genre in some detail to show how it invites the viewer to occupy a spectatorial position from which the film appears to unfold according to the wishes of the spectator.

What political questions does the cinema in these parts try to address/resolve in order to create the kind of star who can become a politician in the years to come? In Chapter 3, I discuss the roles played by Chiranjeevi in his films to extend my argument on cinematic populism. Between 1983 and 1995, Chiranjeevi, like Rajnikant repeatedly played the 'rowdy', a criminalized lower class/caste character. The rowdy of the mass film is a figure of excessive enjoyment and considerable effort goes into producing him as an authentic subaltern. However, the lower class hero is marked by a distinction, which frequent references to the star's stature in the fiction reinforces. I show how a representative of the masses, whose superiority and difference from those he represents is never in doubt, emerges in the domain of the fiction as a means of resolving intractable problems of citizenship.

In Chapter 4, I examine the censorship controversy that erupted around Chiranjeevi's *Alluda Majaka* (1995), to show how diverse issues and players brought about a moment of stasis for the star and the mass film alike. A critical component of the problem that Telugu cinema now confronted was the phantom viewer, who bore close resemblance with the fan and was believed to be wholly the product of a degenerate cinema. Examining the responses of groups who agitated against this film and fans of Chiranjeevi who rallied in its support, I argue that the film anticipates the responses of anti-obscenity groups and, in

fact, comes pre-programmed, as it were, with a censorship mechanism prohibiting identification with the star, who is seen performing transgressive actions in the fiction. The controversy also created the conditions for a major makeover of Chiranjeevi even as it displaced the root of the problem confronting the star with the vulgar roles he played in the mass film.

Telugu cinema of the mid-1990s suggests that a tricky problem confronted major Telugu stars who found themselves with screen images they could neither use nor shed. The star could not play certain kinds of roles and the rowdy roles he usually played were not working at the box office either. In Chapter 5, I discuss how Chiranjeevi worked around the obstacle to re-emerge as the industry's fulcrum, that too at a time when he was being written off as a spent force. The remaking of Chiranjeevi occurred against the backdrop of a much larger attempt around this time to revamp the mass film. From 1997, the mass film was made to shed its 'obscenity' and other excesses related to the screen rowdy. Around this time Chiranjeevi, who till now was Telugu cinema's most famous screen rowdy, transformed himself into a respectable and even paternal figure, much like the troika of south Indian stars whom the mass film generation succeeded. The 'newness' of the star's image was now among the highlights of the mass film. The revival of the mass film was a part of a crucial manoeuvre by the Telugu film industry to meet the economic and aesthetic challenges to the dominant production model, initially assembled around NTR in the early 1980s. In the process of reinforcing this model, at a time when theatrical attendance was in fact on a decline, the film industry produced yet another politician. What can the cinema of this movement against change tell us about the star-politician that emerges out of it?

In this book, I use some of the material initially gathered for my PhD dissertation titled *Fans and Stars* (Srinivas 1997). I would also like to believe that the argument is completely different from the one I tried to make in the dissertation and essays I published on fans and films of Chiranjeevi, before and after its submission. A substantial part of the book's central argument on how stars work and the salience of the fan response was formulated in the process of writing another book comparing Telugu and Hong Kong cinemas, tentatively titled *Frontiers of Cinema*. At least in part, the refusal of Chiranjeevi to fade away quietly is responsible for the postponement of my discussion of how Jackie Chan speaks Telugu.

Notes

1. K. Murali Mohan, the then Chairman of the Andhra Pradesh Film Development Corporation (APFDC) was quoted as saying that 1 November 1997 was the official deadline for the completion of the phased relocation of the Telugu film industry to Hyderabad (*Jyoti Chitra*, 18 September 1998: 22).
2. For details, see http://pphp.sarai.net/content/index.html. Visited on 25 May 2005.

PART I

1

Whistling Fans and Conditional Loyalty

What can cinema tell us about the politics of our time? There can of course be little doubt that studies of the cinema, from Siegfried Kracauer's magnum opus on German cinema (2004) to M.S.S. Pandian's (1992) study of MGR, have attempted to answer precisely this question. The obscene intimacy between film and politics in southern India provides an opportunity for students of cinema to ask the question in a manner that those in the business of studying politics would have to take seriously. This chapter argues that this intimacy has much to do with the fan-star relationship. Chiranjeevi's career foregrounds the manner in which this relationship becomes one of the important distinguishing features of Telugu cinema, as also a key constituent of the blockage that it encounters.

Earlier accounts of fandom by social scientists (Hardgrave Jr. 1979, Hardgrave Jr. and Niedhart 1975, and Dickey 1993: 148–72) do not ponder long enough upon this basic question of how it is a response to the cinema. As a consequence, their work gives the impression that the fan is a product of everything (that is, religion, caste, language, political movements) but the cinema. I will argue instead that the engagement with cinema's materiality—or what is specific to the cinema: filmic texts, stars and everything else that constitutes this industrial-aesthetic form—is crucial for comprehending fandom.

Studying Fans

Fans' associations (FAs) are limited to south Indian states.[1] Historically speaking, however, some of the earliest academic studies of Indian

popular cinema were provoked, at least in part, by the south Indian star-politician and his fans (for example, Hardgrave Jr. 1973). What new questions might this uniquely south Indian phenomenon throw up for students of other cinemas but also disciplines that have little interest in the cinema?

Arguably, popular cinema in this region, Tamil Nadu in particular, drew the attention of social scientists because of its *excesses*. It was impacting politics in rather more direct ways than the world was familiar with and fans' associations were presumably a part of this strange mix of cinema and po!itics. This history of politics as well as scholarly responses to it, which by the mid 1990s included the work of K. Sivathamby (1981), S. Theodore Baskaran (1981 and 1996), Chidananda Das Gupta (1991), Pandian (1992), and Sara Dickey (1993), are necessary starting points for my work. While this history of scholarship makes it relatively easy for me to make my case for the study of fandom, I would also like to draw on the concept of the spectator to carry out my investigation. In Film Studies it is usually the spectator who is the object of theorization. There had been some discussion in the early 1990s on the gap between the viewer/audiences and the spectator in Film Studies. This was occasioned by the work of some scholars who began to study film audiences, at a time when 'Audience/Reception Studies' was a growth industry spawned by academic interest in television and other popular cultural forms.

I will refer to this discussion briefly to give a sense of the difficulties Film Studies has had in working around the problems posed by the viewer-spectator gap. David Bordwell's notion of the spectator is a useful starting point for the elaboration of the issue. Bordwell argues:

> [T]he 'spectator' is not a particular person, not even me.... I adopt the term 'viewer' or 'spectator' to name a hypothetical entity executing the operations relevant to constructing a story out of the film's representation. My spectator, then, acts according to the protocols of story comprehension (1985: 30).

Bordwell, however, goes on to demonstrate the manner in which the discipline dismisses the viewer when he adds, 'Insofar as an empirical viewer makes sense of the story his or her activities coincide with the process [of comprehension adopted by the spectator].' Bordwell is in effect suggesting that there is no distinction between the members of the audience and the spectator.

By now there is far too much evidence to ignore the fact that actual readings of filmic texts need not correspond or coincide with the process of comprehension laid down by a film. I will have the

occasion to discuss (mis) readings of audiences at some length in the later chapters and show that the 'many sorts of particular knowledge', which Bordwell acknowledges are brought to bear upon comprehending texts (or 'hollow' forms as he calls films) are not merely supplementary, but central to the empirical viewer's act of reading.

The viewer-spectator distinction appears in the work of Miriam Hansen as the gap between the 'social audience' and the spectator (1991: 2). Hansen's work allows us to see that the viewer is a member of the social audience, one who is physically present before the screen and in the presence of others like/unlike her. The spectator is a construct of the film, an abstraction. The introduction of the social audience into her discussion is necessitated by Hansen's perception that the social audience's engagement with the cinema has no bearing on discussions of film spectatorship in film theory.

Paul Willemen (1994) draws attention to the gap between two other entities which correspond with the viewer and spectator respectively: real and inscribed readers. Willemen cautions against ignoring the 'unbridgeable gap between "real" readers and authors and inscribed ones, constructed or marked in by the text' (1994: 63). The spectator of a film is not a 'real' viewer. Because, to use Willemen's distinction, '[r]eal readers are subjects in history, living in given social formations, rather than subjects of a single text. The two types of subject are not commensurate …' (p. 63).

As if in deference to Willemen, Film Studies and studies of audiences, whether the latter are categorized as Anthropology or 'Reception Studies', do not often try to deal with both simultaneously. However, Willemen's statement is prompted by the fact that the two types of subjects are often collapsed, in spite of the disciplinary division of labour. As film scholar Judith Mayne would have it, confusing the spectator for a person, a viewer, is 'symptomatic of unresolved and insufficiently theorized complications' (1993: 33).

I will attempt to extend the conceptualization of spectatorship by bringing to bear upon it 'real' viewers from historically specific contexts and ask how this juxtaposition might facilitate a better understanding of cinema. The work of scholars like Miriam Hansen (1991), Judith Mayne (1993), and Jackie Stacey (1994) notwithstanding, audiences and spectators continue to belong to different disciplines.

In the context that I examine, the engagement with audiences cannot but confront the obvious and apparently direct linkages between mass cultural forms and electoral mobilization. As such, these linkages

have begun to draw the attention of scholars from diverse disciplinary backgrounds across Asia in recent times (Chua 2007). How a complex empirical phenomenon like fandom can become an object of the study of cinema, even as its political salience is highlighted, is a challenge that I hope to address in the course of this chapter.

I will begin my examination of fandom by outlining its history and go on to discuss its salient features. In the course of this chapter, my key concern is to identify a set of questions thrown up by fan activity and the response of the star to them that can be taken to the study of films themselves in the later chapters. My observations on fan activity are based on interactions with and unstructured interviews with fans of Chiranjeevi and other Telugu stars in Vijayawada, Hyderabad, Ongole, Tirupathi, and Madanapalle. Wherever possible, I have drawn attention to the similarities between fans' associations of different stars and differences between those of the same star. My interviews and interactions took place in two intermittent spells. The first was between 1994 and 1997 and the second between 2001 and 2002. On two occasions in 1996 and 1997, I had the opportunity to talk to Chiranjeevi fans from different parts of Andhra Pradesh when they had gathered to attend functions in Hyderabad and Ongole respectively. The first spell of 'field work' was carried out at a time when momentous organizational changes were occurring in the Chiranjeevi fans' associations.

In this chapter and the rest of the book, I provide rough translations of oral statements, film dialogues, and print sources from Telugu while quoting them. I indicate the use of English phrases/words in the original statement/text and also provide a transliteration of the Telugu phrase when concepts, film industry terms, or definitions are being discussed.

Historical Emergence of the Fan

The Telugu word for fan is *abhimani* (admirer) and fans' associations are called *abhimana sanghalu* (*sangham* in the singular). The English word fan, too, is frequently used in Telugu publications and by fans' associations alike. *Abhimani*, outside the context of cinema, does not have the negative connotation of the word fan. For example, the Telugu newspaper *Vaartha* described as *abhimanulu* (plural of *abhimani*) the ordinary people who had come to pay their last respects to the Gandhian, Vavilala Gopalakrishnayya, who was no film star (2 May 2003: 1). Abhimani is prefixed with '*veera*' literally 'heroic', but used ironically to connote fanaticism, while referring to fans of film stars.

Fig. 1: Uniquely South Indian: King Khan Fans Club, Vijayawada advertises its presence on its banner in the Urvasi theatre complex during the exhibition of Shah Rukh Khan's film *Don* (Farhan Akhtar 2006). There are a handful of associations dedicated to Hindi film stars in different parts of Andhra.

Baskaran (2005) states, 'The tradition of fan clubs (*rasigar manram*) in Tamil Nadu goes back to the silent era, the late 1920s. Hollywood stars like Eddie Polo and Elmo Lincoln, whose films were hugely popular in South India, had an organized fan following in TN [Tamil Nadu]'. However, from Baskaran's essay, it is not clear if the rasigar manrams were like the present day fans' association at all—either in composition, organizational structure, or in terms of their activities. In all likelihood, the fan of the kind that is found in fans' associations of the present is of a much more recent origin in Andhra Pradesh.

The category of the fan appears quite often in Telugu film journalism in the period between 1940s and 1960s. The English phrases *cine fan* or *film fan* were used to refer to educated connoisseurs of cinema or lovers of 'good' or 'quality' cinema. According to Turlapati Kutumba Rao, secretary of Andhra Pradesh Film Fans' Association (APFFA) between 1963 and 1980, the association was formed in 1947, and promoted good cinema by giving away awards to the best film, actor, director, etc. This association was in turn modelled on the Madras Cine Fans' Association established in the previous decade (information based on the author's

interview with Turlapati Kutumba Rao, Vijayawada, 9 July 1998). Typically organizations of film fans instituted and gave away awards to filmmakers and actors. Telugu film fans of the pre-1960s vintage were coeval with *prekshaka sanghalu* or viewers' associations, which in addition to giving away the odd award also campaigned against pathetic conditions in local cinema halls (*Roopavani*, September 1950). Both had an overwhelmingly educated, middle class, and male membership. We can catch a glimpse of the activities of viewers' associations from the September 1951 issue of the film journal *Roopavani* which published a letter from the secretary of the 'Tenali Prekshaka Sangham' (Viewers' Association, Tenali). It stated that the association's members realized that they had not done anything for the town and arranged a meeting with local exhibitors. As a consequence of the meeting, it was reported, theatre managements made the following assurances: booking counters would be opened one hour before the screening and theatres would avoid overbooking; when new films were released audiences would be made to form queues—with the help of the police—and only one ticket would be issued per person; separate counters would be opened for women; when new films were released, counters would be closed as soon as the hall was filled to capacity; female gatekeepers would be appointed to manage women's entrances; theatre staff would be given one holiday per week and would not be made to work during the daytime; action would be taken on smokers; vendors would not be allowed to hawk their wares during the screening; and screenings would begin on time (Subbarao 1951: 41–2).

Modern day, or rather post-1960s, fans of film stars are distinguishable from earlier viewers' associations not only by their lower class and caste origins but also the kind of activities they perform (discussed below). In fact, apart from the shared nomenclature, there is very little that these two groups share.

That the emergence of organized fan activity in more recent times is traceable to the DMK's attempt to harness films for political purposes in the state of Tamil Nadu is evident from the work of Robert Hardgrave Jr. (1979). Hardgrave Jr. points out that the first fan club was devoted to MGR and formed in 1953 (1979: 121). The formation of the association coincided with the star's formal admission into the DMK party. It is likely that developments in Tamil Nadu were responsible for the establishment of fans' associations in Andhra Pradesh. However, very little is known about Telugu cinema related developments in the 1950s and early 1960s. Organized fan activity was noticed in Andhra Pradesh

only in 1964, when the film journalist Sudarsanam drew attention to what he saw as a sudden spurt in the growth of NTR associations. Sudarsanam (1964) points out that a few associations dedicated to NTR, including a major one in Kurnool town, were already in existence. However, when a conglomeration of cultural associations decided to organize a public felicitation of NTR in Vijayawada town, the organizers received innumerable letters from associations that sprang up overnight and now wished to take part in the event. The Kurnool association, for its part, wrote to the organizers saying that their '*daiva bhakti*' and '*papa bheeti*' (devotion to God and fear of sin) increased after watching NTR's mythologicals (1964: 18–19).

By this time there was intense competition and one-upmanship between the Telugu superstars NTR and Akkineni Nageswara Rao (ANR), that also spilt over into the public domain. We can see from Hardgrave Jr.'s writings (1979) that the charitable activities of the Telugu stars, especially NTR, bore close resemblance with those identified with both MGR and Sivaji Ganesan, who may have served as models for their Telugu counterparts.[2] From the little material I came across on the 1960s, there was no other notable mention of fans' associations.

A clearer picture of fan activity emerges in the 1970s from printed material as well as my interviews with older or erstwhile members of fans' associations. With the increasing popularity of the next generation of Telugu film stars, especially Krishna and Sobhan Babu, fan activity spread rapidly across coastal Andhra. This spread corresponds with the rapid growth of the film industry, in general, and the exhibition sector, in particular, between the 1970s and 1990s (discussed in Chapter 5). By the late 1970s, skirmishes between Krishna and NTR fans became a common feature of festivities surrounding new releases of their films.[3] It was also around this time that increasingly spectacular acts of fandom became noticeable and fan activity acquired its present day forms. In the late 1970s, stories began to circulate of Krishna fans 'rigging' box office collection figures by bulk purchase of tickets (which were apparently distributed free to hangers on at cinema halls). In the 1980s, there was a further increase in the number of fans' associations, including those that were dedicated to promoting relatively minor stars.[4]

Apart from the general growth of the customer base of the film industry, there were two immediate reasons for this development. First, NTR's political crossover in 1982 which suddenly made his fans players in the ongoing political ferment in the state. Second, the emergence of a new generation of stars, in general, and Chiranjeevi, in

particular, increased competitive mobilization around stars. Neither the scale of their growth, nor the vastly expanded range of activities, can be satisfactorily explained by developments internal to the fan domain. I will discuss the broader context after a brief description of the fans' association from the latter part of the 1980s, when Chiranjeevi was established as the biggest post-NTR star.

The Present

In the 25 years since NTR's entry into politics, Chiranjeevi and Balakrishna increased in stature to become patriarchs, presiding over two different dynasties of stars. Chiranjeevi's youngest brother, 'Power Star' Pawan Kalyan, became popular in the late 1990s while his (wife's) nephew and son of the producer Allu Aravind, 'Stylish Star' Allu Arjun, was launched a few years ago. In 2007 'Mega-Power Star' Ramcharan Tej, Chiranjeevi's son was introduced. Nagendra Babu, Chiranjeevi's younger brother and producer, too, is an actor. As for the Nandamuri dynasty, it took a while for the family itself to come to terms with the rapid rise to popularity of 'Young Tiger' Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao Jr., son of NTR's lesser known actor-son Harikrishna. Two more NTR grandsons (Tarakaratna and Kalyan Ram, promoted extensively by the NTR family) have had relatively limited success. Second and third generation stars have contributed to the growth of fans' associations, even as fans have been drawn into networks of regional, caste, and political alliances.

There are tens of thousands of FAs dedicated to major and minor, male and female, stars in Andhra Pradesh. The density of fans' associations, in general, has a direct correspondence with the density of cinema halls in the state. Chiranjeevi alone is estimated to have had 7900 associations dedicated to him.[5] They are spread across all the three regions of Andhra Pradesh—namely, coastal Andhra, Telangana, and Rayalaseema. A majority of FAs are situated in the urban areas of coastal Andhra Pradesh, with the heaviest concentration in East and West Godavari and Visakhapatnam districts. Chiranjeevi FAs exist in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Orissa, and even Gujarat, according to Chiranjeevi's office staff in Hyderabad. Over the past decade, an increasing number of associations have been formed abroad. Of late, Non-Resident Indian (NRI) fans have become increasingly prominent in the popular film press, sponsoring huge and glossy advertisements. NRI fans received prominent newspaper coverage in 2008, when they began organizing meetings in support of Chiranjeevi's entry into

Fig. 2: Megastar Chiranjeevi Fans, Kuwait. Circa 1996.
Source: CO.

politics.[6] There are innumerable web-based fan organizations, which I will leave out of the discussion because they do not usually perform the activities that are identified with their non-virtual counterparts.

Each fans' association usually has between 10 and 20 members and operates more or less autonomously, in spite of being affiliated to the umbrella organization that is managed by the star's office in Hyderabad. In the case of Chiranjeevi, the apex body is the State Wide Chiranjeevi Youth Welfare Association (SWCYWA), also known as Rashtra Chiranjeevi Yuvatha and State Chiranjeevi Youth, which was formed in 1995.[7]

Most associations promote male stars and their members are exclusively young adults/men in the age band of late teens and the early thirties. They often belong to the vast army of the unorganized workforce of the town/city or are petty traders who own small shops/businesses, or are students (school, college, and university). Hotel workers, motor mechanics, shop assistants, auto rickshaw drivers, and unemployed youth are common in most fans' associations. White collar workers are not absent, but are in relatively smaller numbers. During the course of my interaction with fans' associations, I noticed that the more active associations have a patron, who is often from a wealthier background but does not participate in day-to-day activities. Local businessmen, caste leaders, and politicians function as patrons of fans' associations. I will have more to say about the patron below.

The maleness of the fans' association is striking. FAs are male virtually to the last fan. They remain so even though other youth

organizations like student unions and youth wings of political parties have witnessed the increased participation of young women since the 1980s. In 2001, even the 'Lady Superstar' Vijayashanti's official fan association, the Tirupathi based Aasha Jyothi Vijaya Shanthi Yuvasena, had a male president. He admitted that very few women were regular members although the association itself aimed to serve the interests of women. In Tirupathi, Balakrishna fans deflected the question on gender composition by pointing out that they came across an all-female Balakrishna association, consisting of college students, which never mixed with the regular Balakrishna associations. Apparently, female fans merely tied a banner at the theatre screening the star's film, which was how the male fans came to know about them. The all-female fans' association is a popular urban legend in fan circles and sightings of this entity have been reported by (male) fans from different parts of the state. I have come across just one female fan of the organized kind. I discuss her career later in this chapter. The maleness of the fan domain is reinforced by the fact that fans meet in public places, which are almost exclusively male hangouts.

From the scale of the enjoyment of the cinema to the obsession with the star—the massive investment of time, energy, and money in promoting the star and the extent to which they are willing to go, in doing so—fan's associations are marked by their excesses, *toomuchness*, but also, as we shall see later in this chapter, overdetermination by caste and political mobilizations. There is something exaggerated and amplified about every one of their activities. I am not using some respectable middle class standard as the norm, but this is precisely the sense that their activities are meant to convey. In the 1990s, before they became a part of the official hierarchy, most Chiranjeevi fans' associations were called town-, district-, state-wide, or even All India associations, even though their actual sphere of activity was at best limited to a particular neighbourhood. To this day, except the poorest ones, fans' associations usually have official stationery, complete with letter pads, rubber stamps, and visiting cards. The better-organized ones have caps and T-shirts for display on special occasions. Intense competition demands that each association betters the rest—cut-outs of the star grow taller by the year and garlands heavier, even as poojas for a film's success graduate from goat to bull sacrifices.

The release of a new film has, on occasion, resulted in accidents causing injury and death of fans. In some parts of Andhra and Karnataka, violent fights have broken out between Chiranjeevi and Balakrishna

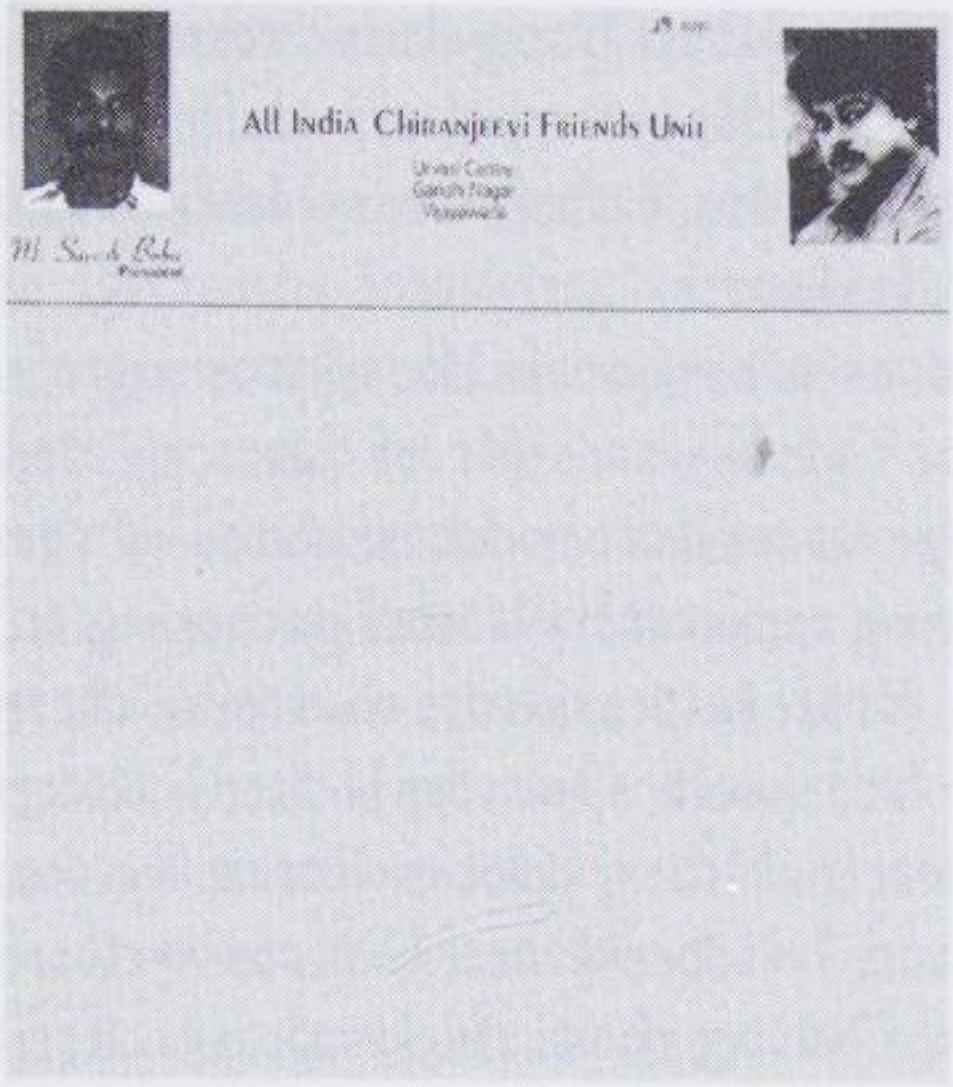


FIG. 3: All India Chiranjeevi Friends Unit, Vijayawada. Inserts of the association President Suresh Babu and Chiranjeevi.
Source: Suresh Babu.

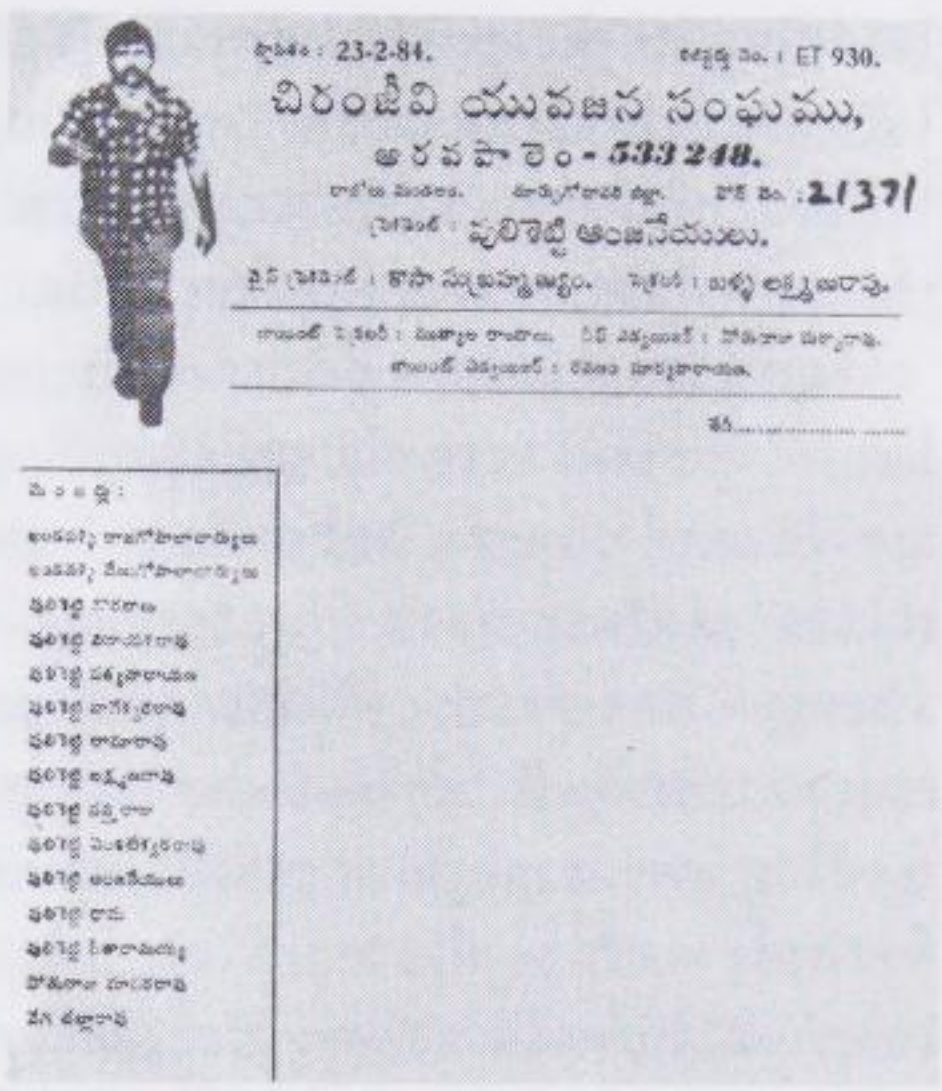


FIG. 4: Chiranjeevi Yuvajana Sanghamu, Aravapalem. Its president Vulisetty Anjayaneeyulu stayed back in Hyderabad for four months to meet Chiranjeevi.
Source: Vulisetty Anjayaneeyulu.

fans. The late arrival of prints at the cinema hall has resulted in riots by fans on a number of occasions, most recently in 2007, when the prints of Mahesh Babu's *Sainikudu* (Gunasekhar) did not reach the cinema hall in time for the opening show.[8] Violent response to real or imagined slights to the star, too, is characteristic of fan activity.[9]

Fans meet in public places, such as cinema halls, to plan their activities or simply to talk about films and life. Most FAs generally do not have regular offices. The official statewide organization of Chiranjeevi fans functioned for two years without an office, out of the homes of its office bearers. Public places usually become the de facto 'offices' of FAs. As a result, FAs have interesting addresses. For example, Suresh Babu, President of the All India Chiranjeevi Friends Unit, who was very active in the early 1990s, has official stationery, including visiting cards and letter pads with the address: 'Urvasi Centre, Gandhi Nagar, Vijayawada' (Fig. 3). Urvasi was the name of one of the three theatres of a popular cinema complex, which now houses an Inox multiplex. Ramu Yadav, President of the Akhilandhra Chiranjeevi Yuvata in the 1990s, had an address that was still simpler: 'Opposite Sandhya 70 mm, Hyderabad'. The space mentioned on his card housed, through the mid and late 1990s, various buildings including a commercial complex whose basement was a regular den of illegal lottery sellers. Another

building in the general direction also housed an inexpensive restaurant. I located the association by turning up at the lottery den, where I was indeed guided to a Chiranjeevi fan (not Ramu Yadav) who told me that the actual office was the restaurant next door.

Fans' associations position themselves as fixtures in the city or town's landscape and actively seek publicity. The most visible of fan activities are around cinema halls. Fans indulge in collective celebrations of the release of their star's film by decorating cinema halls and gathering in strength to view the film in question. Most importantly, they take their enjoyment well beyond the cinema hall itself. One finds fan activity feeding into a range of public activities, including celebration of secular festivals such as the star's birthday and Independence Day, as well as religious ones like *Ganesh Chaturthi*. During these celebrations, charitable activities, known in fan circles as 'social service', are performed. In the past decade, however, with major stars acting in just one or two films per year, there has been a general decline in fans' activities centred around cinema halls. Fans have increasingly diversified to promoting other members of their favourite star's family and also performing more charitable activities than even before. The increased prominence of social service is also a consequence of the insistence of stars like Chiranjeevi that fans perform socially purposeful activities (discussed below).

Also striking is the close link between fans' associations and language. This is much more evident in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, where fans' associations often make declarations of their love for Tamil/Kannada. The role of Rajkumar fans in linguistic identity politics in Bangalore city has been studied in detail by Janaki Nair (2005: 234–70). Even in Andhra Pradesh, we notice that associations are essentially formed around stars who speak the fans' language on the screen—not share the same 'mother tongue'. In Tirupathi, for example, there are fans' associations of Tamil stars, but they are not as well organized as those of Telugu film stars and are invariably formed by Tamil-speaking people.[10] I raise the point mainly to suggest that a simple link between fan activity and linguistic identity politics cannot be made. While language, like caste, is a factor in the formation of fans' associations, it is by no means the cause in whose promotion fans gather.

Fans in Politics

Returning to the question I raised in an earlier section, what are the reasons for the rise in fan activity since the 1980s? I suggest that this is a part of a much larger socio-political change, which is manifest in

the phenomenal *proliferation of mobilizable constituencies* in present day Andhra Pradesh. I only draw attention to the obvious: from the Srikakulam movement in 1967, Andhra Pradesh witnessed a number of agitations involving vast numbers of people, some of whom were being assembled into new constituencies (that is, constituencies that did not exist or were relatively insignificant in the past). To take an example, while scheduled castes always existed and the organizations that organized them sometimes traced their origins to Ambedkar's time, in the 1980s, we notice that 'Dalit' becomes an important political category. There is now a new constituency with a set of demands that were not necessarily carried over from earlier associations of the communities that now called themselves Dalits.

If the gradual increase in the ultra-left, post-Srikakulam and Naxalbari, alerts us to one kind of political mobilization that became increasingly visible through the 1970s but especially after the lifting of the emergency, the movement for separate Telangana and Andhra states in the late 1960s and early 1970s is a sign that no one theme was common to the mobilizations of the time.[11] NTR's election campaign, which is of direct relevance to the spurt in fan activity, was arguably the single largest exercise in mass mobilization since independence in this region.[12] NTR called the mobilized subject a member of the Telugu nation. But neither he nor linguistic nationalism had a monopoly over mass mobilization and it became clear, soon enough, that constituencies would continue to proliferate rapidly.[13]

One axis, along which mobilization was occurring, was caste. The 1980s witnessed the emergence of the Dalit movement, especially after the formation of the Dalit Mahasabha in 1986 (see also Gudavarthy 2005). However, upper castes, too, were mobilizing themselves, and probably the most strident opposition to NTR's rule in the coastal Andhra region came from Kapunadu, a movement of the Kapu caste. Chiranjeevi belongs to the Kapu caste but did not have any direct connection with Kapunadu.[14] Andhra Pradesh also witnessed a major agitation by upper caste students against the government's decision to extend reservations to backward castes (Balagopal 1988: 186–93). The anti-reservation movement was modelled on student agitations in Gujarat and anticipated the anti-Mandal agitation in 1990.

The independent women's movement, too, came of its own in the 1980s, although it was not immediately involved in mass mobilization. Simultaneously, the Naxalite movement was growing more prominent in the countryside and rallying behind it were various subaltern groups,

including tribals and landless labourers, who, for the most part, were marked by their lower castes status but were inevitably named as participants in a class war. In the 1990s, the Naxalite movement would make a brief but stunning display of its organizational skills by holding massive public meetings involving hundreds of thousands of people (Balagopal 1990).

The 'Mandal-Kamandal' mobilizations of the early 1990s, too, affected the state, as they did many other parts of the country. It would be useful to recall, here, that competing mobilizations in different parts of the country led the political scientist Atul Kohli to declare that India was facing a 'governability crisis' (Kohli 1990). As far as Andhra Pradesh was concerned, NTR was very much a part of the larger crisis of which Kohli's book tries to take stock.

It was against this larger backdrop that we notice a spurt in fan activity. Some of it was a direct consequence of the overlaps between fans' associations and caste or political mobilizations, as we shall see below. Proliferation of fans' associations surprised film critics because it seemed as if the star, himself, was now only an excuse for the formation of an association.

One of the most striking aspects about fan activity in the post-NTR era is its intimacy with politics, which was partly facilitated by caste mobilization at the local level. The very first sign of the shape of things to come was the 1983 assembly election that brought NTR's Telugu Desam Party (TDP) into power. According to Venkata Rao (2003), NTR fans campaigned actively for the star during the election. Sekhar Yalamanchi, who was NTR's press secretary during the election campaign, states that in the early days of the campaign, fans' associations were the sole foundation on which a party structure was later built (Interview, Hyderabad, 3 February 2008). This was a replay of the ADMK story, which Hardgrave Jr. (1979) suggests was, literally, *a party of MGR fans* in the early days of its existence.

While historically speaking, the political crossover of stars is a crucial development, fans' involvement in politics actually *precedes* this development, suggesting that the immediate reason notwithstanding, fans' associations were already being impacted by the overall proliferation of mobilizable constituencies. By the late 1970s, Krishna fans in Vijayawada were involved in politics, as marginal supporters of the Congress (I). However, political affiliation of FAs was not as evident as it was after 1982. Once stars began contesting elections, a political affiliation was more or less thrust on FAs, and political participation

became one of the 'official' functions of fans belonging to some associations. Thus obfuscating a much longer and complex engagement with politics by fans in Andhra Pradesh. It is this complexity that I will try to foreground in the discussion below.

The late arrival of the star-politician into the picture in Andhra Pradesh allows us to see that political participation of fans is not accounted for by a top-down model in which a star's political choice determines the actions of his fans. Even in instances when there seems to be an obvious transformation of fans into political cadres loyal to the star-politician (for example NTR), the star's political career or ambitions do not either exhaust or fully account for his fans' activities. NTR fans did not become political cadres of any consequence, although they campaigned for the TDP during the elections in 1983 and after. Some non-Kammas in coastal Andhra left NTR FAs because the star, who was a Kamma, began to be seen as serving the sole interests of his caste group after the formation of the TDP. Understandably enough, some Congress sympathisers too abandoned NTR FAs when the TDP was formed. Prior involvement of fans in political and caste mobilizations, which till 1982 did not come in the way of their fandom, is likely to have played a part in the migration. The president of the state wide association of NTR fans, Sripathi Rajeswar, went on to become a minister in the late 1980s. While most NTR fans remained fans and formed or joined Balakrishna FAs, over the years they become more and more tenuously linked to the TDP, not only because of splits within the party and the NTR family, but also due to the shifting alliances of local patrons (discussed below).

Within months of the 1983 election, Krishna fans issued a warning to NTR, who had only just become the Chief Minister, that they would hold a black flag demonstration at the venue of the TDP's annual conference, known as *Mahanadu*, if his government did not stop harassing their idol. The immediate provocation was a show-cause notice issued to Krishna's Padmalaya Studio by the Municipal Corporation of Hyderabad for violation of land use regulations by the studio (*Andhra Jyothi*, Vijayawada Edition, 24 May 1983: 1). Although no such demonstration was held, the threat anticipates the rapid politicization of fans from the 1980s. Conspiracy theories of fans now implicated various departments of the government, even those that were not under the direct control of NTR or TDP.

Around this time (1983) a number of Chiranjeevi FAs, too, were formed. The release of *Khaidi*,[15] which coincided with the retirement

of NTR from full-time acting was a watershed, because the film's popularity established Chiranjeevi as the most important star of his generation. It is unlikely that the exit of some fans due to caste or political considerations from NTR FAs led to the formation of Chiranjeevi FAs in any direct manner. Being a non-Kamma, however, without any political affiliations, Chiranjeevi became the rallying point not only for Kapus who began to be mobilized on an unprecedented scale in coastal Andhra after NTR's election, but also for other non-Kammas and Congress sympathizers of different castes. In the other two regions of Andhra Pradesh, Chiranjeevi FAs may not have witnessed the same degree of polarization along political lines, although, in terms of caste composition, they are similar to the FAs in coastal Andhra.

Further, complicating the relationship between fans and caste mobilization, is the evidence of caste factions among fans' associations devoted to the same star. In smaller towns in coastal Andhra and Rayalaseema, FAs tend to be formed with members drawn from a single caste (not necessarily that of the star). The same town, therefore, could have different FAs of Chiranjeevi, each with members drawn from a particular caste. In parts of coastal Andhra, separate Chiranjeevi FAs were formed by Dalit and upper-caste youth, in the 1990s. These have frequently fought with each other—sometimes during the screening of Chiranjeevi films, which both groups were dedicated to promoting.[16]

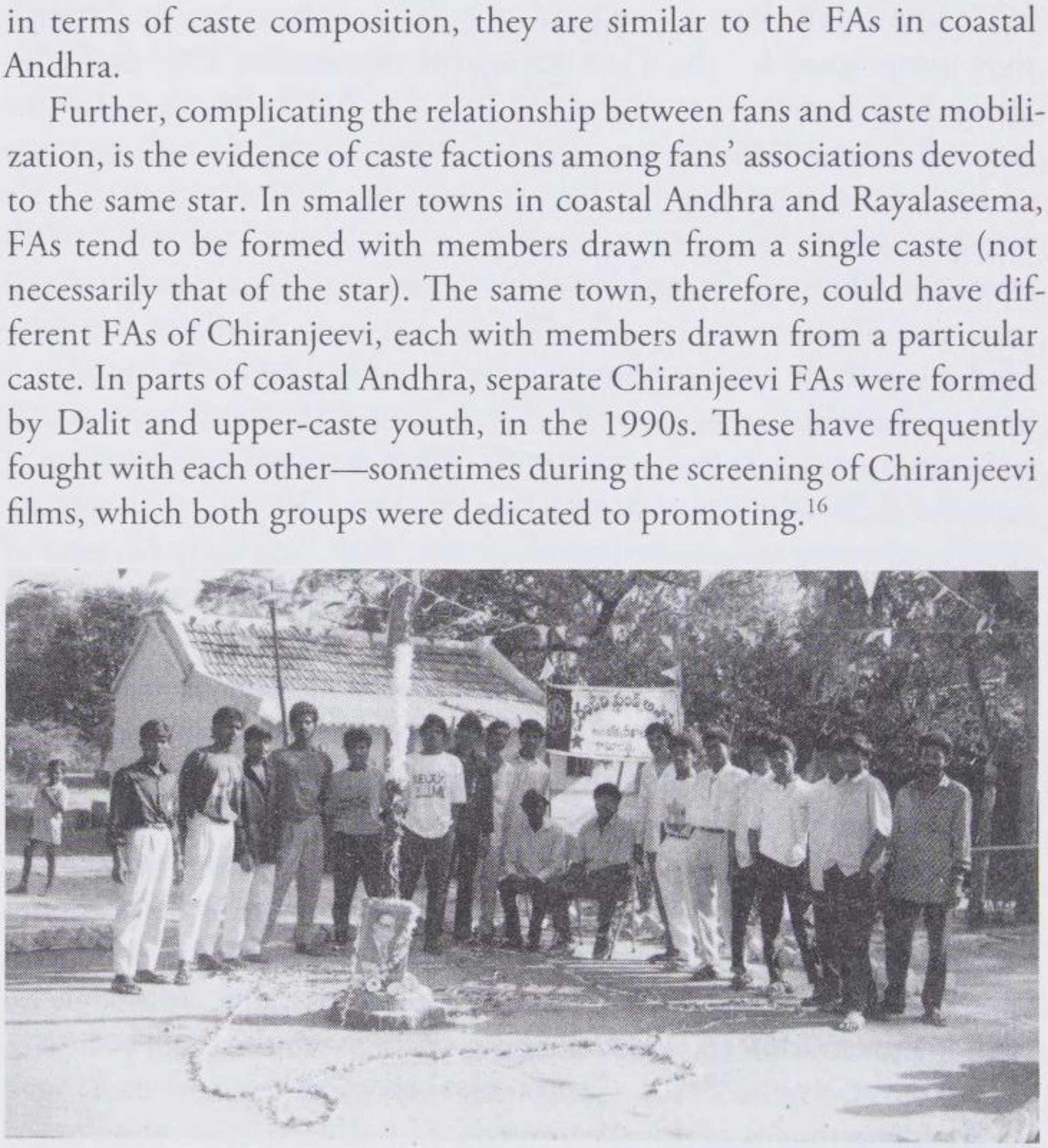


Fig. 5: Chiranjeevi Friends' Association, Kamareddy celebrates Ambedkar Jayanthi outside its office. A framed portrait of Ambedkar can be seen at the centre of a map of India drawn around a flag post.
Source: CO.

In different parts of the state, Chiranjeevi fans from Dalit castes have also been active in local Ambedkar Youth Associations and other such Dalit organizations. A photograph sent to the star's office in 1995 (see Fig. 5) shows Chiranjeevi fans from a Telangana town celebrating Ambedkar's birthday outside the office (a 'pucca' building with an asbestos roof, not a street corner).

More recently, Chiranjeevi fans have been installing statues of Ambedkar and also Mother Teresa in different parts of coastal Andhra.[17] The caste semiotics of statues is not limited to the installation of Ambedkar statues. While Mother Teresa has been owned by all sections of Chiranjeevi fans, Dalit and Kapu fans have taken to the installation of statues of Ambedkar and Allu Ramalingiah (an erstwhile comedian of NTR's generation and Chiranjeevi's father-in-law) respectively. The posthumous rise of Allu Ramalingaiah as a major public figure also has to do with the increasing popularity of his grandson, Allu Arjun. The newspaper report mentioned above, states that a village panchayat wanted to install a statue of Chiranjeevi's *father* (who died in 2008 and had nothing to do with the film industry). The panchayat was planning to seek the permission of the star's family to do so.

The individual careers of some fans are illustrative of the complex web of social and political mobilizations, of which the FAs are a part. Sampathi Ramana is a house painter in Madanapalle town, an important organizer of the Balija/Kapu caste, an active member of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). He is also a member of the Chirnajeevi fans association. When I met him in 2001 he had been a karate instructor for the past thirteen years. Five years earlier, he had established his own karate school: Okinawan Goju-Ryu Universal Martial Arts. Although his political affiliation is known to all those with whom he interacts, he is close to 'Chinna', an important Kapu organizer of the Congress party and the local patron of Chiranjeevi fans. Also a regular fixture at Chinna's office is Subhas Chandra Bose, a member of the Kapu caste and president of one of the Chiranjeevi fans' associations in the town (Interview, Madanapalle, 8 February 2001).

However, we need to note that fans' associations cannot be reduced to fronts for caste mobilization. Notwithstanding (or perhaps due to) the overwhelming evidence of the overlaps between fan activity and caste mobilizations of the time, there is considerable anxiety among fans about being seen as 'casteist'. In the course of my conversations with fans, there have been many vehement denials of any link between the caste of the fan/star and the formation of fans' association. No doubt,

fans, like other modern Indians, wish to be seen as 'secular' citizens whose caste is incidental and immaterial to the way they lead their lives. In an interview with me, two fans from Karimnagar claimed that most Chiranjeevi fans in their town did not even know the star's caste and therefore the question of caste loyalty being a factor in FA composition did not arise (in Karimnagar). They, however, conceded that they themselves knew Chiranjeevi's caste and one of them said he was a Munnuru Kapu, one of the Kapu sub-castes. Despite my repeated assurances that I did not attribute any casteism to their membership in a Chiranjeevi FA, they explained at some length that their love for the star pre-dated their awareness of his caste (B.S. Venugopal and Ravi Goud, Interview, Ongole, 1 May 1997).

Insofar as the FAs in Andhra Pradesh are concerned, paradoxically the question of caste loyalty does not arise so long the superstars belong to the Kamma caste. In the 1970s, youth from a wide cross-section of castes joined the FAs of different Kamma stars such as NTR, ANR, Krishna, and Sobhan Babu. With the emergence of Chiranjeevi as the most popular non-Kamma star ever, the new possibility of pro-Kapu or anti-Kamma alliances arose.

The FAs of Vijayawada offer significant insights into the kind of changes that were taking place in FAs during the 1980s and 1990s. Much to the discomfort of Chiranjeevi, his fans in coastal Andhra Pradesh became active in Congress politics, although the star himself claimed to be neutral. From the mid-1990s, the star has repeatedly warned his fans not to 'misuse' the fans' associations for political ends. Nevertheless, in Vijayawada and some other parts of coastal Andhra, the Kapu-Congress nexus within Chiranjeevi FAs saw the fallout of local politics. Coastal Andhra witnessed Kapu mobilization in the 1980s under the leadership of Vangaveeti Mohana Ranga Rao (popularly known as Ranga), a Congress MLA from Vijayawada. He actively encouraged Chiranjeevi FAs, in addition to providing protection to them from the police and rival FAs. Indeed Chiranjeevi's constituency in coastal Andhra is remarkably similar to that of Ranga's, consisting of Kapus on the one hand, but also a wide cross-section of the urban poor belonging to lower castes on the other.

For fans in Vijayawada, regardless of caste, participation in politics was mediated by the patronage of leaders like Ranga and his Kamma TDP rival, Devineni Rajasekhar (known as Nehru).[18] Both were leaders of criminal gangs long before they entered politics.[19] Some Vijayawada-

based fans claimed that Ranga was a fan of NTR and patronized local NTR FAs until the star joined politics and went on to give a party ticket to Nehru to contest assembly elections in 1983. It is a fact that the rival Vijayawada gangs became rapidly politicized in the 1980s.[20] Both Ranga and Nehru extended their influence over the city by mobilizing students, taxi drivers, hotel workers, etc.[21]

Meanwhile, a prominent section of Balakrishna fans shifted their alliance from TDP to NTR TDP (the smaller faction that remained loyal to NTR) when the party split in 1995. Some years later this group of fans moved to Congress. The multiple migrations were caused by the movement of this group's patron, Nehru, who remained with NTR at the time of the split in the party. Some years after NTR's death in 1996, Nehru joined the Congress (I) and was elected as MLA on a Congress ticket in 2004. Another faction of Balakrishna fans in Vijayawada sided with the Chandrababu Naidu led TDP after the split because their local patron was loyal to Harikrishna, NTR's son who sided with

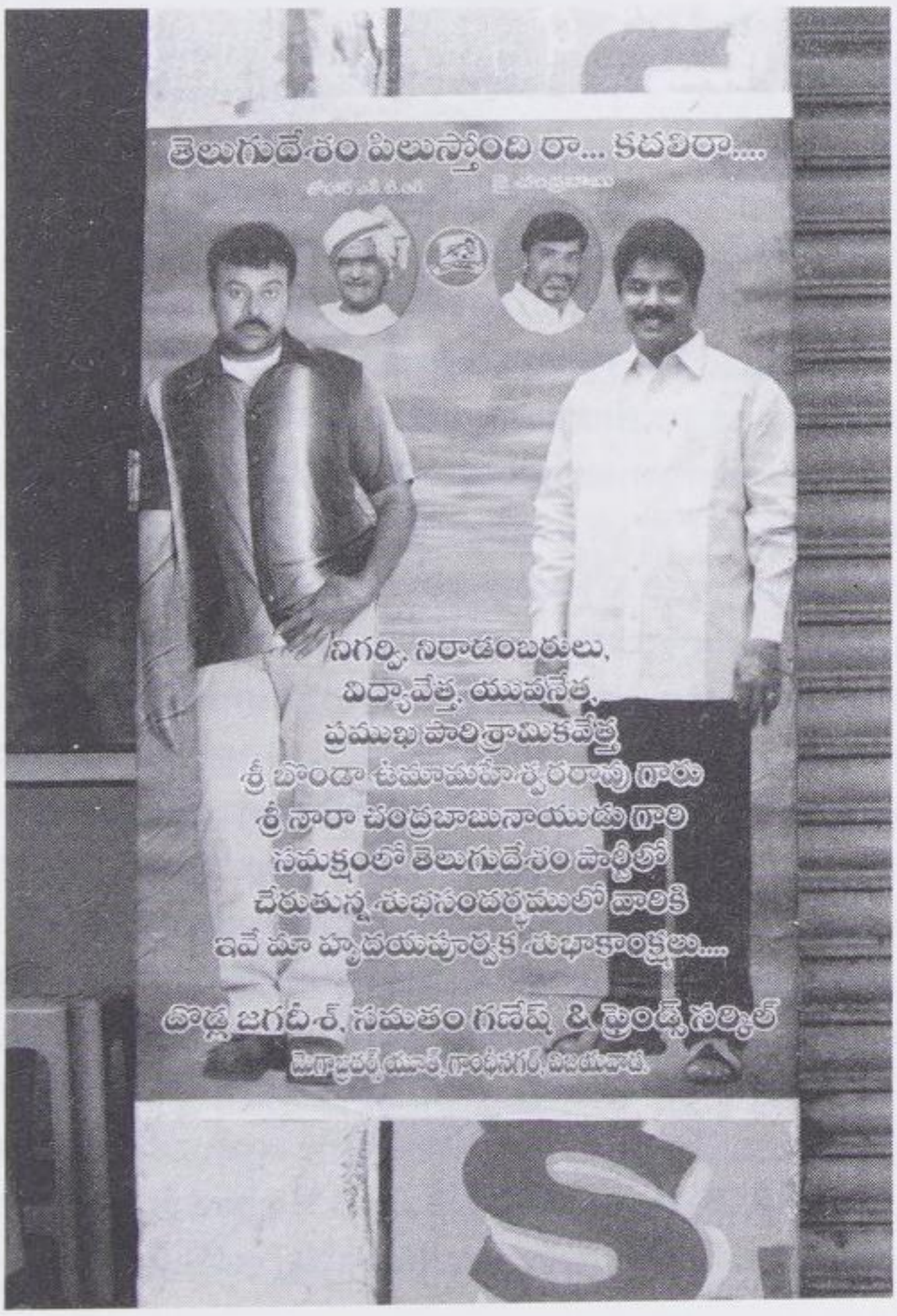


Fig. 6: The Telugu Desam fan: Chiranjeevi fan Dodla Jagadeesh of Megabrothers Youth Association, Vijayawada complements his patron Bonda Uma Maheshwara Rao on joining the Telugu Desam Party (2005). *Source:* S. Ananth.

Fig. 7: Vinyl hoarding promoting *Stalin* outside Apsara theatre, Vijayawada, exhibiting the film. Images of Chiranjeevi, Dodla Jagadeesh, Bonda Uma Maheshwara Rao, and Ramcharan Tej (Chiranjeevi's son) are seen. The banner installed by Vijayawada Chiranjeevi Youth also makes an appeal for blood and eye donation.

Naidu. Harikrishna then formed his own party and even fought against the TDP in 2004 but returned to the latter after some years. During this period, Balakrishna fans, in general, and Harikrishna loyalists, in particular, began to promote NTR Jr. as the star who was destined to replace Chiranjeevi as the film industry's biggest icon.

Fans' involvement in politics, therefore, often meant association with prominent local politicians who, at times, had criminal records/backgrounds. This mode of political socialization, implied by the phrase 'criminalisation of politics', was very much a part of the larger developments in politics around this time. In the past decade, fans' associations across the board began to seek out patrons in prominent political positions, causing strange cocktails of political and caste alliances. Chiranjeevi films are now routinely promoted by fans who owe allegiance to both Nehru and Vangaveeti Radhakrishna (the son of Ranga as well as Congress MLA since 2004). One major faction of Chiranjeevi fans was in the TDP from 2005–8, and slogans in support of a local TDP patron also appeared in the publicity of Chiranjeevi

films (see Figs 6 and 7). The patron of this faction resigned from the TDP and declared his support for Chiranjeevi's as-yet-unformed political party in 2008. Venkatesh fans now invoke Ranga by adorning their publicity material with the latter's pictures. Venkatesh's father, D. Ramanaidu was a TDP MP between 1999 and 2004. Arguably, fans' involvement in politics had less to do with the star's own preferences and more to do with the complex mediation of local alliances, castes, and politics.

I will cite one last example to highlight the complexities of fans' involvement in politics. During the 2004 parliamentary election, Chiranjeevi actively promoted and even wanted to campaign for the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) candidate, Ch. Aswini Dutt. Dutt, whose family owns Vyjayanthi Movies, is a prominent Kamma film producer and distributor and is closely associated with Chiranjeevi. However, a majority of Chiranjeevi's own fans' associations, due to the long history of their involvement in the politics of Vijayawada, supported the Congress (I) candidate, Lagadapati Rajagopal. The primary reason for the fans' choice was the fact that the Lagadapati faction in the Congress party then included Vangaveeti Radhakrisha (now a member of Praja Rajyam Party).

In the 2004 election, Lagadapati Rajagopal won (as did Radhakrishna), but not before rival groups of fans conducted poster campaigns promoting their respective candidates. Newspapers reported that a section of the star's fans had expressed their anger at Chiranjeevi's support of the TDP candidate by destroying a massive cut-out of the star they had themselves erected.[22] Another report claimed that Chiranjeevi had to bow down to his fans by restricting his campaign for Aswini Dutt to a mere announcement of his support to the latter's candidature.[23] Dutt, himself claimed that he was contesting the election as Chiranjeevi's candidate.

Against the background of fans' involvement in local politics, the decision taken by Chiranjeevi to form his own political party and Balakrishna's announcement soon after that he would actively campaign for TDP in the 2009 election, needs to be read as an attempt by these stars to channel fan's political activity towards formations they themselves approve of. The problem of harnessing fandom is now laid at the door of politics, in a manner of speaking. The underlying assumption seems to be that the political party is capable of resolving the problems thrown up by the kind of loyalty that the fans' association institutes.

FIG. 8: The Congress fan: Images of Chiranjeevi and the Congress MLA (and son of Vangaveeti Mohan Ranga) Radhakrishna on the cut-out of *Stalin* outside Apsara theatre.

CONDITIONAL LOYALTY

While the messy domain of local politics is a useful point of entry, the central issue before me is the relationship of the fans' association with their star. I will propose that contrary to fans' own hyperbolic declarations of their loyalty to the star, evidence from the ground suggests that the fan-star relationship is one of *conditional loyalty*. There can be no doubt that the fan is tremendously invested in the star. However, we need to note that (a) loyalty is willingly and consciously *donated* to the star and (b) the relationship, often spoken of in feudal or devotional terms with numerous superlatives thrown in, is contingent upon the fulfilment of certain conditions, brought to bear on the activity in question and also on the star.

At first glance, it appears that the basic pre-requisite of fandom is the fulfilment of social-political and even economic aspirations of fans. Speaking for myself, my earlier argument on fans (Srinivas 1997 and 2003) was hinged on the demonstration of the existence of such aspirations, which were largely unarticulated. Before going on to what

FIG. 9: Father and sons. Vinyl hoarding of Ramcharan Tej and Ranga, in Vijayawada (October 2007), welcoming the former's entry into the film industry.

I hope will be a more convincing explanation, let me go over the aspirations argument by drawing attention to two very different fans' careers. These examples demonstrate the links between loyalty to the star and fandom's ability to fulfil aspirations of the fan, no matter how poorly these may be articulated.

In 1979, when Chiranjeevi was still playing supporting roles in low budget films, his first FA in Hyderabad, *Akhila Bharata Chiranjeevi Abhimana Sangham* was formed (B.S. Venugopal, Interview, Ongole, 1 May 2007). Its members claim that it was the first Chiranjeevi FA anywhere.[24] It had about twenty-five members of whom ten were active. The President, B.S. Venugopal, is a matriculate and belongs to a backward caste. Although he always liked NTR's films and holds that NTR was and *is* the number one star (although NTR was no more at the time of the interview), he was never a member of any NTR FA. On the other hand, Chiranjeevi's 'quick movements' (he used the English phrase and could not translate it into Telugu) made him a fan of the actor. Venugopal saw a great future for Chiranjeevi after watching the star's first film, *Pranam Khareedu* (1978), and 'wanted to encourage him'. The *Sangham* promoted Chiranjeevi by publishing

booklets and flyers on the actor. It adopted these techniques from the NTR FAs. Venugopal established his own 'recording dance' troupe and performed Chiranjeevi's hit dances in various places within and around Hyderabad.[25] This was his personal contribution to publicize Chiranjeevi's talent as a dancer. He continued to dance for the next thirteen years, while he was otherwise employed as a private gunman and later (from 1986), as an attendant in a government office.

To the question of why they joined or formed FAs, the standard response of fans is that they like the star and want to promote him/her. Dickey (1993: 163) quotes a fan who says he wants to 'promote and support the star'. But why would anyone want to do that? In other words, what are the conditions under which loyalty is donated to the star? Venugopal's career alerts us to one possible explanation. He *predicted* Chiranjeevi's stardom and, more importantly, foresaw a role for himself in the association hierarchy. It is possible that he did not become an NTR fan because NTR FAs were saturated by 1979. 'Promoting the star' was, for Venugopal, also a means of promoting himself as a performer and fan organizer. It was a career opportunity of sorts, even if the career did not (and was not meant to) provide economic sustenance. Is there a rational choice at the heart of the seemingly bizarre array of things that fans do?

The exceptional career of Parachuri Vijayalakshmi, among the few, if not the only, female members of a fans' association in Andhra Pradesh, strengthens the 'career opportunity' hypothesis. Vijayalakshmi is a Kamma by caste and a graduate. She established and became the president of the All India Vijayashanti Cultural Organization, Vijayawada. Her entry into and exit from the world of fans happened long before the formation of the 'official' fans' association of Vijayashanti, Aasha Jyothi Vijaya Shanthi Yuvasena, whose President we met briefly in the previous pages. When asked why she became an organized fan she said, 'Of course I like Vijayashanti, but I started this association because someone [in the industry who was a family friend] requested me'.[26]

'Liking the star' is evidently not enough for a woman, and an upper caste graduate at that, to join an FA. In addition to the obligation she felt to her family friend, she was also motivated by the ambition to enter politics. She wanted to contest as a Municipal Corporator. She felt that the public exposure gained through fan activity would help her in electoral politics.

During her tenure as a fan organizer, she had a very cordial relationship with Chiranjeevi fans although she was aligned with their

'enemies'—termed thus not only because they promoted a rival star but also because they had affiliations to political parties that were violently opposed to each other, namely, Balakrishna fans. She was well known in the fan circles of Vijayawada and popular with theatre owners also. However, in 1995, she decided that she was not going to be fan any longer. She destroyed her association files and albums containing photographs of her activities. She had failed to get a TDP nomination during the Municipal Corporation elections in 1995. But more importantly, she felt that her work 'didn't receive due recognition and encouragement from "her" [i.e., Vijayashanti]' (Interview, Vijayawada, 18 March 1996).

The examination of fans in politics suggests that at least some of the conditions attached to devotion have to do with fans' socio-political aspirations. Dickey (1993) points out that fans gain a degree of respectability in the neighbourhood through their activities, which include mediating between the urban poor and agencies of the state. Even as we keep in mind the aspiration for respectability, I will note that the developments in the fan domain occur in a wider context marked by considerable social and political unrest. Nevertheless, *fan activity is not conventional politics through other means*. Fans' associations are neither fronts for caste groups or political parties, nor for that matter, new forums for older forms of mobilization around caste or party. What then are they forums for?

Socio-political Consequences of Cinephilia

Having raised the point of involvement of fans in politics, let me now put it aside for the moment and return to the central and basic question animating the discussion in this chapter: what then has the cinema got to do with fan activity?

I propose that the fan is, among other things, a cinephile. Cinephilia is a film theoretical concept that refers to the love or obsession with the cinema. Discussions of cinephilia in film theoretical writings revolve around intensely pleasurable moments in the cinema that somehow defy explanation. Christian Keathley (2000), for example, speaks of the cinephiliac moment as one that is memorable and pleasurable *in spite of* its marginality to the narrative. What is of interest to me is not the history of the concept as it has been deployed in Film Studies but how it might be deployed to illuminate the fan phenomenon.

I will begin with the minimalist understanding of cinephilia as obsession with the cinema. The very existence of the concept alerts us

to the propensity of the cinema to produce inexplicable and excessive responses among viewers. I will limit the discussion of the history of the concept to just a couple of authors whose work is of direct relevance to the questions this chapter is trying to address, namely Paul Willemen (1994) and Lalitha Gopalan (2003).

Lalitha Gopalan (2003) deploys the concept in her discussion of contemporary Indian cinema. Revisiting Paul Willemen's elaboration of the concept (1994), Gopalan notes the invocation of cinephilia in popular films. Arguing that 'contemporary Indian films have closed the gap between the screen and the spectator,' Gopalan calls for a shift in the critical engagement with the cinema: 'To account for the changing conditions of production and conditions satisfactorily, between the screen and the spectator, we should read popular Indian films from the point of view of cinephiliac, one that is based on an ambivalent relationship to the cinema: love and hate' (p. 3). I will have something to say about what Gopalan calls the cinephiliac readings of films in the subsequent chapters. While agreeing with her point about the importance of understanding the working of cinephilia in films, I do not see ambivalence as a feature of the fan's relationship with the cinema. Instead, I would like to draw attention to a context in which the 'love of the cinema' or rather an obsession with it, becomes a collective enterprise that has discernible socio-political consequences.

Gopalan's use of the term cinephilia does not quite retain the essence of Willemen's conception, which hinges on the impossibility of verbalizing of the obsession with the cinema. Paul Willemen's examination of *photogenie*, a theme of mid-twentieth century French discussions on cinema, draws attention to precisely this aspect of the cinema:

> *Photogenie*, then, refers to the unspeakable within the relation of looking and operates through the activation of a fantasy in the viewer which he or she refuses to verbalize. In this sense, it requires the viewer's complicity in refusing—as if refusal were sufficient to obliterate it—the fall into a symbolic signification (language) and the corresponding privileging of a nostalgia for the pre-symbolic when 'communication' was possible without language in a process of symbiosis with the mother (Willemen 1994: 129).

In a conversation with Noel King republished in the same book, Willemen goes on to offer a remarkably complex elaboration of cinephilia, identifying it with nostalgia, a moment in the history of cinema ('early 1950s to the late 1960s'), 'fetishising of a particular moment, the isolating of a crystallizing expressive detail and so on' (1994: 227).

Willemen's understanding of the concept is founded on psychoanalysis and it is not easy to extricate it from the psychoanalytical framework. What I find most useful about Willemen's elaboration is first his insistence that cinephilia is a direct consequence and response to a *textual presence*: 'Cinephilia does not do anything other than designate something that resists, which escapes existing networks of critical discourse and theoretical frameworks' (1994: 231). Second, his argument that the cinephiliac response is shared by critics, film theorists, and general audiences as well:

> All critics do not select the same privileged moments to which they attach cinephilia. It is the same when people talk on the street corners after seeing a film, saying which moments they liked. The moments are different but each is talking about a pleasurable relation to that particular film. The difference in selection is less important than the fact that you are signalling the relationship of pleasures generated between you and the screen, generated by that particular film (because its not just any old film) (1994: 234).

This understanding of cinephilia as a *shared response*, even if the immediate trigger varies from person to person, is of critical importance to my argument, as we shall see below. Third, useful detail in Willemen is his notion of cinephilia being intimately connected to a sense of revelation ('epiphany') but also *excess*. He points out, 'So it is no accident, indeed it is highly necessary, that cinephilia should operate particularly strongly in relation to a form of cinema that is perceived as being highly coded, highly commercial, formalised and ritualised' (p. 238). This brings us home to precisely the kind of Telugu films that were being made and watched from the 1970s, by fans and everyone else.

My attempt to extend cinephilia into the discussion of fan activity might be seen as a digression from Willemen's conception of it. However, by identifying fandom as a quintessentially cinephiliac response, it becomes possible to see it as a response to the *cinema* and not, say, a consequence of the religiosity of the masses in this part of the world. Further, and this is a question that I would like to take back to film theory, if fandom is not organized cinephilia, what is?

Once we identify fandom as a form of cinephilia it becomes possible to normalize it because excessive responses to the cinema, which do not easily lend themselves to explanations in ration-critical terms, are a part of the problem with the cinema. The only difference, however, is that the fan phenomenon appears to have socio-political consequences in the film culture that nurtures it. These consequences have critical-theoretical implications for the students of cinema and politics as well. Therefore,

rather than beginning with the assumption that fandom is politics by other means, I will start with the premise that fandom is a particular form of cinephilia. That it has political consequences is a bonus but this does not transform the phenomenon itself from a manifestation of cinephilia to something else.

What distinguishes organized fans of the south Indian variety from others is their tendency to make public their cinephilia, to display it and indeed house it in the public domain. The dovetailing of cinephilia into political mobilization is one of the consequences of this characteristic of organized fan activity in these parts.

The public staging of cinephilia is evident in a number of important fan activities. On most evenings, fans meet in public places like teashops and street corner *pan* shops, often in the vicinity of a cinema hall. Hardgrave Jr. and Niedhart (1975: 27) point out fans are 'repeaters', which is to say that they watch the same film a number of times. However, fan activity is not limited to watching films. I will outline below various forms taken by cinephilia in the fans' association, tracing the movement of cinephilia further and further away from film viewing and the cinema halls itself.

M. Madhava Prasad (2007) offers interesting insights into fandom when he argues that there is a relationship between *fan bhakti* and what he calls subaltern sovereignty. The larger issue, he argues, has to do neither with fans nor stars but the 'crisis of sovereignty in the Indian republic which gives rise to various phenomena, including the political power of film stars'. Fan bhakti, for Prasad, is a community-forging response by the subaltern. Rather than assume that bhakti pre-exists the fan in the relationship between people and gods in this part of the world, Prasad argues 'enthusiastic communities can form around a variety of entities, and the nature of the community thus formed will have to be inferred from the nature of the entity, the nature of the acts of bhakti addressed to it, the nature of the satisfactions derived from these acts, etc.' (n.d.). Enthusiasm in turn is a particular form of devotion. Prasad draws on David Hume's notion of enthusiasm, which is characterized by the independence of devotion and contrasted to superstition which is in turn favourably inclined towards priestly power. Like other forms of enthusiasm, fan bhakti too is a sign of *unbound political passions* in search of an object. Prasad argues that the disconnect between political passions and their object is caused by the incomplete nature of the transition from older, princely sovereignties to republicanism.

What is most attractive about Prasad's argument is that it allows us to move far beyond simplistic claims about the manipulation of fans by

stars or vice versa. Further, fan activity assumes tremendous political significance, not due to the decisions of individual stars to contest elections, but because it is a part of a broader phenomenon (subaltern sovereignty). What we should therefore be looking for, Prasad suggests, is not so much the agent that rouses these passions (star, celebrity, politician, etc.) but the almost accidental discovery of the 'idol' (to continue with the bhakti metaphor).

While the main argument of Prasad's essay, as well as its scope, is of interest, it is not clear at this early stage of the argument's life how such explosion of 'enthusiasm' can be accounted for in the post-emergency period, around thirty years after the formation of the republic. With fan activity proper, we notice an intensification of fan bhakti since the 1980s. Nevertheless, by drawing attention to the foundationally political nature of fan bhakti, Prasad cautions us against reading too much into instances of career advancement in fans' associations. I will not adopt the concept enthusiasm or attempt to explain the crisis in sovereignty in my examination of fan activity. Instead, I will stay with the rather more basic question of the nature of the relationship between fan activity and its object, the cinema and its stars.

Dickey's observation that fans' meetings in Tamil Nadu mostly revolve around 'conversations about the star and his or her performance' (1993: 150) holds good for Chiranjeevi and other FAs in Andhra Pradesh. Talking about films is arguably among the most popular leisure activities in this part of the country. Recent developments in satellite television, both in Telugu as well as other languages, suggest that the collective obsession with the cinema, of the kind that is witnessed among fans, is in fact gaining larger currency, even as it is being systematically transformed into 'pure entertainment'.[27] FAs precede televised forms of cinephilia by a few decades, but what really sets associations apart is that film viewing in cinema halls remains an important part of it.

The protocols of performed fandom are also interesting. For example, fan talk on cinema, while sharing a number of similarities with other equally compulsive forms of re-telling film stories and re-living the experience of the cinema, has one significant difference. Criticism of the star is generally avoided even when his flops are being discussed, as is clear from the example below.

Considering that fan associations sponsor these discussions, the virtual ban on criticism of the star is not surprising. While, the avoidance of criticism of the star is the 'official' policy and public stance of FAs, in the private conversations I carried out with fans between 1994–7,

fans from varying backgrounds were highly critical of Chiranjeevi for his roles in *Mechanic Alludu* (1993), *Big Boss* (1995), *Alluda Majaka* (1995), and *Rickshawvodu* (1995), for reasons that were not always shared. Chiranjeevi, too, said in his interviews with me that fans have, on occasion, made angry long distance phone calls to his office and written angry letters when they were disappointed. I will discuss an exceptionally articulate and angry letter to the star in Chapter 5.

There is however no doubt that there are serious limitations to the openness of fan discussion. But 'critical publicity' as Jurgen Habermas (1989) terms it, is hardly the point. As I will argue later in this chapter, it would be a mistake to expect European bourgeois norms of public debate to surface in the fan domain. FA discussions could occasionally result in active rejection and 'unauthorized' readings of the kind that are highlighted in Anglo-American writings of fandom (for example, Lewis 1992). I will suggest, however, that the importance of fan discussion lies not in their ability to generate oppositional readings of films but in contributing to a film culture whose crucial defining feature is the *spill over of the obsession with films from the cinema hall to other spaces.*

Typically, participants in FA discussions involve members of the association, their friends (who may not be fans of the star), and regular hangers-on at the meeting place, which is, after all, a public place.

In Tirupathi, fans of both Chiranjeevi and Balakrishna meet at the *Koneru Gattu* (steps of a temple pond) at the heart of the city. Each of these groups actually consists of members drawn from different fans' associations dedicated to the respective stars, which function autonomously of each other and in different parts of the city. Unlike most other places in Andhra Pradesh, geographical proximity of the two groups is possible because of the general absence of violence between these groups in the city.[28] Their 'address' is widely known to hangers-on at cinema halls. Tirupathi, due to its commercial and religious significance, attracts a large floating population of fans who visit the city on work or for pilgrimage. They seek out the Koneru Gattu groups, sometimes with the help of directions provided by cinema hall regulars, join in the discussions, exchange information, and also participate in the banter that goes on between the rival groups.

Current and forthcoming films of their star as well as other stars are the most discussed topics. Exchanging news on the box office front and predictions about takings are fairly common. Also dwelt upon are the latest news and gossip on the industry front, often picked up from

popular film magazines or from visitors to Hyderabad, who invariably return with all kinds of information and rumours.

What is of interest is the way films are analysed. Films are generally broken down into components along lines that correspond with the way the film industry and the popular film press looks at films. The star, story, direction, music, dances (choreography and setting), comedy track, photography ('richness' of certain sequences), family/ladies sentiment, and climax, etc. are the most widely recognized and discussed topics.

In the films that came up for discussion in my presence,[29] which included two commercially unsuccessful films, *S.P. Parasuram* (1994, discussed in some details by fans in Vijayawada), and *Mrugaraju* (analysed in response to my questions by fans in Tirupathi), the star's performance was of course declared to be very good. In *S.P. Parasuram*, it was pointed out, Chiranjeevi played the role of a police officer very convincingly (it was noted, however, that it was unusual for the star to play the role of a police officer). The opening sequence and first fight were considered to be all wrong because no police officer hunts criminals all by himself. But the comedy track was terrible because it showed Chiranjeevi, a Superintendent of Police in the film, clowning around with a petty crook (the heroine, played by Sridevi). The direction was judged sloppy because Chiranjeevi in police uniform, leaves three of his shirt buttons open (as he does in his roles as a rowdy). The climax was declared disappointing. Moreover, the story was already familiar as the Hindi version of the Tamil original (of which the film was a remake) was already released. The heroine (or rather, her lack of glamour in this film) and the fact that this was a 'police film' in a state where police films generally do not do well, were all offered as reasons for its failure.

Apart from breaking down the film into components, the method of analysis involves paying attention to minute details and making cross-references to other films. Fans read meanings into each of the filmic components and have a set of rather loosely defined expectations of these components. It is therefore possible to reject a film because its components (including the star in very exceptional cases) do not meet fans' expectations.

What Gopalan (2003) calls cinephiliac reading of films is very much in evidence in discussions amongst fans. Intertextual references are made between a whole range of films which potentially include all Telugu, Hindi, or English films available to a generation of filmgoers.

The star is the most often discussed and essential component (not only of FA discussions but also of the popular film press, which thrives on star-centred reporting).

I do not wish to claim any degree of autonomy or uniqueness for the fan discussions of films. The continuities between the popular press and these discussions are symptomatic of the broader film cultural context that it inhabits and shapes. Fan discussions alert us to the need for the enunciation of that broader context, which like the discussions themselves, draws attention to the framing of spectatorial expectations.

Although talking about films is what fans do most of time, their most prominent and controversial activities are theatre-centred: carried out within the premises of cinema halls. These include decorating the theatre on the occasion of a film's release and noisy celebration within the cinema hall. I would also like to treat as theatre-centred activity the generation of publicity material for the star's films and all other efforts made to ensure a film's success. I include these diverse activities under one head, although some of them are not performed at the theatre or near it, because all of them are centred on forms of collective filmviewing that characterize fans' associations. They are also among the most important functions of FAs (directly linked to 'promoting the star').

FIG. 10: Fans celebrate 50 days of *Alluda Majaka* (1995) at a cinema hall screening the film.
Source: CO.

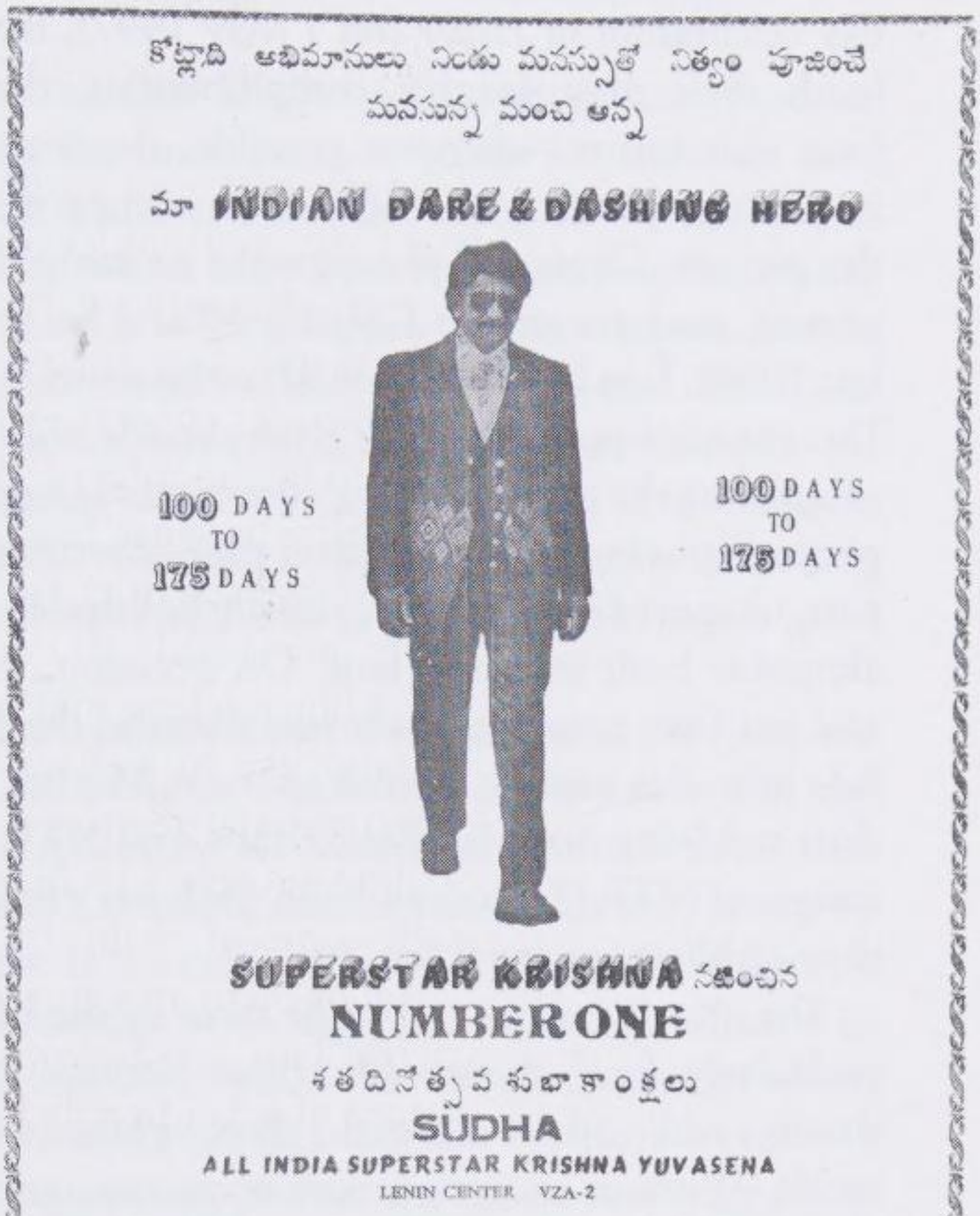


FIG. 11: 'Promoting the Star': A flyer issued by Sudha of All India Superstar Krishna Yuvasena, Vijayawada celebrating the 100 day run of their 'Indian Dare and Dashing Hero's' *Number One* (S.V. Krishna Reddy 1995). *Source:* Sudha.

Throughout the 1990s the resourceful FAs installed plywood cut-outs, at times costing tens of thousands of rupees of the star, within or in the immediate vicinity of theatres. Of late, vinyl screen prints have supplemented and even replaced plywood cut-outs in most places. The smaller FAs publish flyers in praise of the film or paste posters (either crudely illustrated or unillustrated) to advertise it. Cloth/vinyl banners are strung across the roads leading to the theatre or main thoroughfares of the town/city. Decoration of theatres with flowers, distribution of sweets to the audience before the opening show, providing biryani packets (or other packed dinners), and sometimes even clothes for the theatre staff on the hundredth day of screening are among the other theatre-centred activities (see also Dickey 1993: 158). Since the late 1990s, fans, in general, and Chiranjeevi fans, in particular, have been donating blood and pledging their eyes as a part of the celebrations of a film's release or success.

All publicity material generated by fans prominently display the name of the association and some or all its members. To cite an extreme example, a poster published on the occasion of the hundredth

day celebration of *Hitler* (on 1 May 1997), merely lists dozens of fans (with their photographs) complimenting the star on the occasion. Fans also ensure, whenever possible, the material generated by them is photographed, with themselves occupying a prominent place in the picture. Copies of photographs or samples of the material (flyers, posters, etc.) are sent to Chiranjeevi and his other FAs by post. In the late 1990s, fans began to issue advertisements in popular film magazines. This genre of publicity, too, gives considerable prominence to the fans sponsoring the advertisement, sometimes inserting dozens of names and photographs into a single quarter page advertisement. In the more recent past, images of local patrons, usually political leaders of standing, appear alongside both stars and fans. On occasion, the images of the patron and fan alike have overshadowed those of the star himself. Chiranjeevi fans have also made it a point to insert Mother Teresa's photographs in their publicity material. Balakrishna and NTR Jr. fans routinely insert images of NTR (Senior) and also the latter's first wife Basavatarakam, in their publicity material.

The opening show and night show of the hundredth day are almost exclusively fans' shows. On these occasions, revelling fans occupy theatres while others choke the thoroughfares hoping to make their way inside. Without exception such occasions are heavily policed, and one witnesses frequent cane charges outside theatres and, at times, patrolling by armed policemen within. Rioting has broken out on some such occasions, resulting in the destruction or damage of theatre property.

Regime of Entitlements

What do we make of these cinephiliac activities? I will stay with theatre-centred activities of fans and ask this question with specific reference to the noisy and disruptive celebrations of fans at cinema halls.

Lakshmi Srinivas (1998) presents us with the 'active Indian viewer' (as distinct from a passive western one), in Bangalore and Boston alike, as a unique offshoot of Indian audiences' engagement with the cinema. Collective activity of viewers has a considerably longer and larger presence in the history of cinema than might be apparent from ethnographies of present day audiences. I will refer to some studies from other parts of the world that force us to look beyond Indian exceptionalism as an explanation. Staying with fans, for the moment let me begin drawing attention to how they watch films.

I have in mind the typical opening day shows of a major star's new release. Of course there is much noise, drowning the movie's sound

track (the quantity of sound that Dolby audio systems can produce these days tends to change the situation somewhat). For the most part, the young men who often spend considerable amounts of money and energy, battling hundreds of others to lay their hands on tickets, actually *pay surprisingly little attention to what is happening on the screen*. Future viewings will any case ensure that no detail is missed out. The focus therefore is on producing a range of celebratory performances *before the screen*. These include chanting slogans ('Zindabad/Long Live Megastar Chiranjeevi', for example), whistling, shouting, dancing, throwing coins at the screen and balloons before the projector's beam to cast giant shadows on the screen.[30]

What really matters during these shows is not so much the spectacle on screen but the one before it, in which the viewer/fan is also the performer. This off-screen spectacle (like a number of other FA activities which need not be spectacular) is *addressed* to the absent star, as it is to fans themselves and others. It is a celebration of the presence of fans (at the theatre). It is as if the message sent out by the whistling collective is: 'We are here'. In a fascinating inversion, a situation is created in which their very presence seems to make the film happen. Notice, for example, that whistling and cheering actually *precede* the much-anticipated first appearance of the star in a film. As if by whistling, the viewing collective can summon the star to appear before it.

Celebration before the screen (in theatres) is evidence of an inversion similar to the one Ashish Rajadhyaksha (1993a) argues took place in early Indian cinema. Rajadhyaksha notes that in the case of cinema (unlike the still photograph or calendar illustration):

> [A] large number of people converged upon a single screen, to collectively gaze upon the projected image. … In place of a series of mass produced frames that went out to a number of individual buyers/viewers, many people came to collectively view a single frame, and *rendered it mobile* (p. 68, original emphasis).

A very similar spectatorial relationship exists in the kind of films that fans promote most enthusiastically. The star appears on screen *because* fans congregate to witness the show (not the other way round) and *for them*, often addressing them using a variety of techniques. (I discuss this genre of films and the kind of the spectatorial relationship it institutes in some detail in Chapter 2.)

There is ample evidence to suggest that fans make a variety of demands on the filmic narrative, often insisting that it progresses according to their

expectations. These expectations figure prominently in fan discussions in their regular meeting places. While all viewers go to the cinema hall with a series of expectations that are produced by particular film cultures, what distinguishes the fan is that these expectations result in a set of practices and demands on the industry. Such demands indicate that fans have a fairly well developed notion of *entitlement*. To take a very trivial example, it is not uncommon for fans to pressurize theatre managements to re-screen parts of the film, particularly songs.[31] I will note, in passing, that attempts to control/disrupt the narrative flow are more commonly associated with the viewership of popular theatre on the one hand and post-celluloid technologies on the other, but not celluloid films.

When a film is perceived to meet their expectations, fans could return again and again to watch it, proving to be repeaters indeed. However, when a film disappoints them, despite claims to the contrary, they stay away from it after the customary viewing, or on rare occasions even prevent its screening (some instances are discussed below). This is best illustrated by citing some incidents related to the fans of 'Superstar' Krishna, who have a reputation among fan circles for being the most committed/fanatical of fans.[32] There are good reasons why they have acquired such a reputation. On one occasion, that is now part of the fan folklore, Krishna issued newspaper advertisements requesting his fans not to boycott his film *Varasudu* (E.V.V. Satyanarayana 1993) when angry fans protested against his role in the film.[33] Krishna fans, who have been promoting the star's son Mahesh Babu since the late 1990s, were once again in the news when *Bobby* (Sobhan 2002) was released. The film's original version had the hero and heroine dying in the end but the ending had to be changed to a happy one after the film's release because the film did not go down well with the viewers. In fact, the advertisements for the film focused on the changed climax from the second week of the film's run. Krishna, who had nothing to do with the film apart from fathering Mahesh Babu, appeared on television and in print advertisements saying that the change was in deference to viewers who could not bear to see Bobby/Mahesh die (*Vaartha*, Hyderabad edition, 15 November 2002: 1).[34] There was a rumour in the industry circles that the film's director, producer, and even the cinematographer went into hiding, fearing violent attacks by disappointed fans.[35] The happy ending notwithstanding, the film was a commercial disaster.

Such incidents are not unique to the Krishna fans. Chiranjeevi is reported to have said that screenings of *Aapadbandhavudu* (1992), a

'classy film' were stopped by fans in some places because they did not like the role played by him (*Filmfare*, January 1994: 50).[36]

I will quickly go over routine activities of fans to further illustrate my point about entitlement in fan activity. To begin with day one, when a film is released, at the very outset there is a tussle with theatre managements for tickets. In the past this used to result in riot-like situations, but since the mid-1990s, fans' associations, or at least the more prominent ones, have obtained 'quotas'. Theatre managements sell a large number of tickets for the inaugural screening of the major stars' vehicles to fans' associations. There have been occasions when special shows, locally known as 'benefit shows', have been organized for fans in the early hours of the release day. Then, there is the question of how long a film should run. Fans, and not the laws of profit alone have decided this more than once. Fans attempt to ensure that a film runs for fifty, a hundred or more days (depending on its popularity and the size of the town/city). In the 1970s, Krishna fans bought tickets and distributed them free of cost to ensure that the film ran on. In the 1990s, fans' associations often approached the distributor when they heard about the film's impending withdrawal and insisted on postponing it. Sometimes deals were struck with the distributor and losses were shared. On other occasions, messages were sent to the star and the producer to intervene.[37] When nothing succeeds, the film is of course withdrawn, but conflict with the industry has at times resulted in acts of fan violence.[38]

How do we understand fans' notion of entitlement, which could on occasion stands so solidly in the way of profit maximization or minimizing loss? It is useful to note Ashish Rajadhyaksha's formulation of the cultural role of the cinema to understand what might be at stake:

> The cultural role of the neighbourhood movie theatre as a prominent institution of the new public sphere in this time [1940s–50s] is crucially accounted for by the fact that a ticket-buying spectator automatically assumed certain rights that were symbolically pretty crucial to the emerging State. … These rights—the right to enter a movie theatre, to act as its privileged addressee, to further assert that right through, for example, various kinds of fan activity both inside and outside the movie theatre—went alongside a host of political rights that defined the 'describable and enumerable' aspects of the population, like for example the right to vote, the right to receive welfare, the right to have a postal address and a bank account. Film historians through this period repeatedly assert how in many parts of India the cinema was perhaps the first instance in Indian civilisation where the 'national public' could gather in one place that was not divided along caste difference.

It is not important that these rights were not necessarily enforced on the ground. It is important instead to recognise that spectators were, and continue to be, *symbolically* and *narratively* aware of these rights, aware of their political underpinnings, and do various things—things that constitute the famous 'active' and vocal Indian film spectator—that we must understand as a further assertion of these rights in the movie theatre (Rajadhyaksha 2003: 35).

In Rajadhyaksha's own work, the argument on 'spectatorial rights' is founded on his understanding of the ways in which Indian cinema illustrates Christian Metz's famous formulation (1982) of the cinema existing for the spectator. Indeed, Rajadhyaksha argues, in Indian cinema there is recognition of

> the unambiguous, unshakable *fact* that, in one sense, the camera's point of view and hence of the projector, can be nothing more than the view of the actual viewer, and the ensuing *need* to let the viewer recognize this, and then to reassert, acknowledge this fact at various points in the narrative suturing process. At this level, therefore, when the viewer purchases a ticket, enters the auditorium, and 'releases' the film saying, 'I am here' ('I am present … I help it to be born' [Christian Metz]), what the cinema is doing is to incarnate one of the most fundamental, if ambiguous at times, rights of democracy (2000: 283, original emphases).

Rajadhyaksha's argument is rather more complex than these excerpts make it out to be. I will stay with two fairly basic points that he makes. First, the political significance of film viewing, in general, and fan activity, in particular, in the Indian context where the cinema has functioned as the cultural front end, as it were, of the new political system. Second, a history of *publicness* that is at once specific to the Indian context but also a consequence of the manner in which the cinematic institution presents itself as existing for the spectator.

Drawing on Rajadhyaksha's argument, I will suggest that the notion of entitlement that surfaces in the fan domain is a necessary starting point for understanding the work of the cinema in our context. I will return to the question of its political significance by making a short detour to the social history of cinema in Andhra Pradesh.

Democracy and Discomfort

Retracing Rajadhyaksha's argument, I will revisit a history that is not unfamiliar to students of Indian cinema. K. Sivathamby (1981) famously proposed that the cinema hall was the first place in modern times where viewers belonging to diverse backgrounds assembled under one roof to witness the same programme.[39] That such an institution would have

social and political implications in a society like ours cannot be denied. Sivathamby's formulation can thus be read as pointing to the *democratic* possibilities of the cinema. The relative absence of explicit restrictions on entry into this space allows us to conceive of the cinema hall as a kind of public institution that has no precedence in India. The contrast case is, of course, print, which required a degree of social and cultural capital to which a majority of the population did not have access. Further, strengthening the conception of the cinema as a democratic form is the evidence that stage performances by amateur drama troupes at times explicitly prohibited members of certain lower castes from entering the performance venues.[40]

I would not like to limit the discussion of cinema's democratic potential to the relative ease with which people could access it. Miriam Hansen's (1991) argument that the cinema constituted what she calls the 'alternative public sphere' is substantially based on the study of the American nickelodeon, an institution that has acquired legendary status in film history for its accessibility to a subaltern customer base. Hansen's argument is that the cinema emerged as an alternative public sphere against the backdrop of decaying bourgeois institutions. It did so '*because* of and *despite* the economic mechanisms' (p. 92, original emphasis).

However, in India and in some other parts of the world, including USA, cinema was not an exclusively working class or lower class entertainment. With reference to India, Stephen Hughes (1996: 83) points out that there was, in fact, a time in its early years when the cinema was a colonial and upper class entertainment form. Nevertheless, Hughes argues, there is a tendency among industry figures and scholars alike to represent the cinema in India as the poor man's entertainment. One formulation, in this vein, proposes that Hindi cinema is the 'slum's eye view' of society and politics (Nandy 1998: 2). An argument about the Indian cinema's democratic nature cannot, therefore, be based on the assumption that we are dealing with a lower class entertainment form.

The argument, I propose, may instead have to be based on a variant of Sivathamby's point about social mixing that the cinema facilitates. Before coming to the Indian case for the cinema, another disclaimer is in order. Even if we recognize that its ability to bring together diverse groups is what qualifies the cinema as a democratic institution, we run into yet another set of celebratory accounts, which we also need to be wary of. In her study of American cinema, Eileen Bowser (1990) points

out: 'The unique quality of the motion-picture audience, people kept saying as the middle classes were seen to enter the improvised theatres [in the nineteen teens], was its democratic mixing of classes' (p. 122). Charles Musser (1994) reiterates this early twentieth century assertion when he concludes his fascinating study on the nickelodeon by stating:

> With the advent of the nickelodeons, moving pictures became a democratic art, at least by the standards of the day. Inside the new movie houses, particularly in the downtown areas, an Italian carpenter in the need of a bath might sit in an orchestra seat next to a native born white-collar salesman or a Jewish immigrant housewife—in short, next to anyone who shared with him a sometimes secret passion for what might flicker across the screen (p. 495).

Now for the Indian instance, this does not lend itself to such glowing and nostalgic accounts. Here the inclusiveness of the cinema has, at best, been a mixed blessing. The cinema hall in most parts of India ensured the segregation of its audiences along class/caste lines as is clearly reflected in the standard model for the construction of permanent cinema halls from as early as the 1920s, if not even earlier. It is well known that there were invariably three to five categories of seats: the lowest was called 'floor' (viewers sat on the cement floor, sand or sawdust pits), the next was the 'bench' (wooden benches), followed by the 'chair', at times superseded by a 'balcony' (which also had chairs) and lastly, the 'dress circle' (or 'box' often providing sofas). Within each class there was a segregation of male and female viewers.[41] The disparities between various classes in the cinema hall were so glaring that the Andhra Pradesh government had to legislate uniform *flooring* for all sections of audience, in order to put an end to sand and sawdust pits in the floor class (vide Andhra Pradesh Cinemas [Regulation] Rules, 1962). Bowser's work suggests that the situation in the US may not have been too different in the early part of the twentieth century when gradation of levels of comfort was one of the techniques by which cinema halls attempted to attract audiences.

The structuring of the cinema hall to manage social divisions, which were also economic divisions, points to the ambiguous nature of the democratic promise of this space. While the partitions separating men and women became extinct, the 'classes' remained.

Another factor, which has almost never come up for discussion in academic writings on the cinema, is the enormity of violence that viewers were subjected to by cinema hall managements. Those with the cheaper tickets were often the targets of this violence but even the chair and balcony viewers were affected. In what is now Andhra Pradesh, this history of violence dates back to the 1940s. In the 1930s and 1940s

there were articles and editorials in film magazines on the problems caused by mobs at cinema halls and the failure of theatre managements to deal with them. In 1939 the Indian Motion Picture Congress resolved to request the provincial governments and Indian states to 'secure adequate police help to stop pick-pocketing, sale of tickets outside booking windows and to maintain peace and order' (*Talk-A-Tone*, December 1939: 7). That theatre managements went ahead and put in place a parallel and private policing mechanism is clear from complaints about the behaviour of theatre staff in the 1940s and 1950s as reported in the Telugu film magazines.[42] And yet, viewers cutting across the social spectrum returned to the cinema.

They did so, and have done so ever since, in spite of the fact that most cinema halls, almost uniformly across the state have been notoriously *uncomfortable*. The situation in Andhra Pradesh only began to change in the 1970s, with the arrival of air-conditioning, when higher levels of comfort were made available to all customers, unlike in the past when the wealthiest sat in sofas in stuffy halls, while the poorest sat on the floor in the same stuffy hall.

There is a *striking mismatch between the low level of physical comfort offered by Indian cinema halls, in general, and the high degree of enthusiasm for the cinema*. Even if we assume that violence is limited to the first few days or weeks of a film's run, when crowd control is an issue for theatre managements, we cannot help noting that discomfort was a given at the cinema hall, starting from the 1930s and 1940s. Cinema halls, it was reported, were hot and filthy and had stray bandicoot (sometimes cats and dogs too) nibbling at the feet, while a host of tropical insects feasted on the blood of the viewers. And these were often the complaints of the viewers purchasing the costliest tickets. The situation, as pointed out by some of the authors of these letters/essays, was only worse for those who bought cheaper tickets.[43]

The apparently masochistic and inexplicable enthusiasm for the cinema may have been an indication of the institution's ability to facilitate a range of transactions that made no sense within a *consumer* rights framework. Evidently, the legendary active Indian viewer returned to the cinema for reasons other than the cool comfort of the auditorium.

Thomas Elsaesser's discussion (2002) of what he calls the two systems of cinema, is useful to conceptualize the nature of the filmgoing experience in our context:

> Going to the movies involves all kinds of things other than watching a film. It presupposes the simultaneous coexistence of two systems. One, we can now

say, is concerned with turning an experience into a commodity: the film as it lives in the collective mind as an event. The other is concerned with providing a service: the theatre, the comfortable seats, the ice cream and soft drinks, as they provide the pleasant atmosphere of simulated luxury for time out with friend or lover. Going to the movies is an activity in which the film is only one of the elements, and maybe sometimes not even the most crucial or memorable one. The cinema, once one looks at it as both an industry and a culture, is really these two systems sitting on top of each other, loosely connected, or rather connected in ways intriguingly intertwined. One is a system that links a space and a site to bodies endowed with perception via a certain set of expected and anticipated pleasures or gratifications. The other system is that which connects writers, directors, producers, cinematographers, actors and moneymen around an activity called making a film (p. 15).

Elsaesser goes on to argue that the two systems are not connected in any natural way and points out that certain films that get made, are never exhibited in theatres. Moreover, neither captures the '*act of faith*' that accompanies the purchase of a ticket, the investment in the possibility that there is a '*transubstantiation of experience into commodity*' (p. 16, emphases added).

Complaints about cinema halls point to the inability of the cinema in India to institute the system that offered 'the pleasant atmosphere of simulated luxury' for decades on end. So what then was the experience that was being transubstantiated into commodity? Although it is tempting to come to this conclusion, let me suggest that the possibility is *not* of the transcendence of caste or even the bracketing of caste. It is the formation of a collective that was *entitled* to be present in the space of the cinema hall *in spite of its obvious internal differences*, which were, in fact, never suppressed. As Rajadhyaksha's work suggests, having gathered into a collective, the film audience then acquires a number of secondary entitlements and can go on make a series of demands on the nature of the commodity (film).

And thus, we arrive, via Rajadhyaksha, at a possible correspondence between the film viewer and the modern political subject: both are beings of entitlement. The surfacing of the notion of entitlement in the sphere of cultural consumption is a necessary part of the formation of what Prasad calls enthusiastic communities. These are mobilizable groups that inevitably find causes/excuses—no matter how trivial these might seem—to display their collective strength. The shared ground of the cinema and politics, then, is not merely the star that migrates from one to the other, but the formation of groups of the mobilized at both sites.

As far as fans are concerned, the glue that binds the group is the cinema: the cinema hall and the film itself. The fan response, as a context specific response to the cinema and its stars, is characterized, first, by the centrality of the notion of entitlement, and, second, by the leakage of cinephilia into spaces beyond the cinema hall and activities unrelated to filmviewing. The cinema is a domain where the consumption of industrially produced 'mass' culture becomes an occasion for a range of cinephiliac performances. The overwhelming sense of excess and waste that the non-participant gets from fan activity is because it is an end in itself. At the socio-political level, the recreation in the viewing experience may, at times, draw attention to the *utopian* dimension of the cinema—one concretized by the democratic promise of the cinema hall—never realized, but remaining an excess that the industry will try to channelize, account for, and harness in various ways. Nevertheless, one is forced to acknowledge that at all times, it simply exists, transferring the anxiety of meaning making to other agencies. The fan, thus, exists because he is entitled to.

Making Meaning of Fandom

The fans' association is, no doubt, a highly productive site. Understanding fan activity, however, poses interesting problems because of its excessive nature and its status as pure performance.

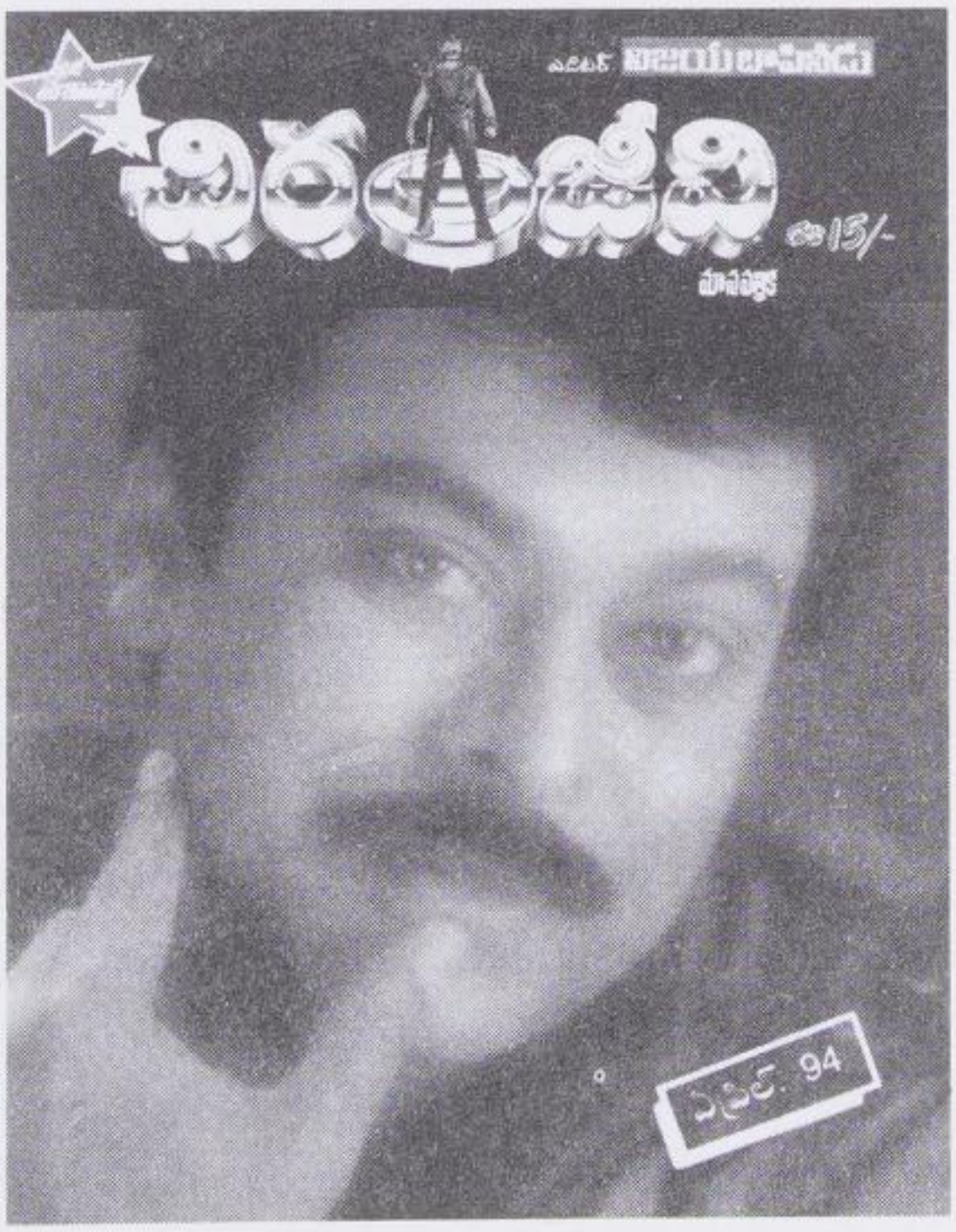


Fig. 12: Chiranjeevi on the cover of one of the booklets of the April 1994 edition of *Megastar Chiranjeevi*. *Source:* AA.

Across the south Indian region, the excesses of fan activity have received considerable attention from the mainstream press. In the work of both Pandian (1992) and Dickey (1993), the sources of information on practically all instances of fans' excesses, including criminal acts and obsessive devotion, are mainstream newspapers and journals, including English language ones.[44] The striking correlation between excess and *visibility* of fans cannot be missed. Excess is a cardinal principle of fan activity, in general, and a distinguishing feature of fans' associations.

Fan activity, in itself, does not have a hidden meaning or an underlying purpose. It comes across as 'pure surface', lacking textual density that is generally attributed to the art object. Individual activities of fans have meaning only insofar as these are constituents of a larger performance, whose immediate addressees are the star, and location the cinema hall and contiguous spaces.

Fan activity leaking into conventional politics and caste mobilization could also be read as evidence of the random nature of things that fans do. Fans do a range of things and the choice is traceable to the availability of local models. Their activities may, at times, be sourced from popular religion. This has led some anthropologists to conclude that the fans' association is, in fact, a variant of a religious cult (compare Michael Jindra [1994] who finds religion in Star Trek fandom). Dickey (1993), too, notes in passing that there are similarities between fan clubs and religious cults (pp. 184n, 194n) but also states, '"Devotion" best characterizes the club members' feeling for stars. ... Fan's commitment to the stars grows out of their devotion; actions are intended to demonstrate such feelings' (pp. 157–8). M. Madhava Prasad makes an ironic reference to the tendency to treat fan activity as worship, when he claims that it is indeed a form of *bhakti*. As such, the similarity is not surprising, considering that the cult too performs an array of excessive and bewilderingly irrational activities.

Fan activity is meaningless in that it gestures towards an obsessive engagement with the cinema and not some hidden cultural or political foundation of the actions performed. By suggesting that fan activity is meaningless, I would like to draw attention first of all to the problem the content of fan production poses. In the 1980s and 1990s, much was made by Anglo-American scholars of the resistant readings of fans and their tendency to produce counter-hegemonic texts (Fiske 1989, Jenkins 1992, contributors to Lisa Lewis 1992). While this claim, too, can be questioned, I will not do so for reasons of focus. I will, instead,

draw attention to the repetitive nature of fan material and ask how it can be interpreted.

Interpreting Fan Productions

The materials fans generate are, at once, voluminous and strikingly repetitive. These materials do not easily lend themselves to content analysis. For the most part there is very little by way of 'content' to be analysed in the 'texts' they produce. I will briefly examine some of the material produced by fans to first elaborate on why it may be termed meaningless, and show how the star has gone on to try and impose order and meaning on it.

First, a note on the problem of plenty. In the mid-1990s, I gained access to diverse materials produced by fans from Chiranjeevi's office in Hyderabad. In 1996–7, I visited the office of Nagendra Babu, Chiranjeevi's brother and honorary president of the state-wide fan organization, which was, in fact, the postal address to which fans sent their letters to the star. The kitchen of this office housed the official ghostwriter, one Mr Sivaji. Sivaji was then a post-graduate student of drama. He spent about three hours in the evening reading and replying letters from fans. When I spoke to Sivaji about my research, he drew my attention to large cardboard boxes in the loft. These boxes contained the 'filed' letters. On an average, he told me, the star received 15–20 letters a day. Since 1996 was a year when no films of the star were released, relatively smaller number of letters trickled in on a daily basis. The figure rose to a hundred or more when a film was released or when his birthday approached. The boxes contained the letters received in the recent past (it turned out that the oldest were less than a year old). Every once in a while these boxes would be disposed. I was free to take my samples of fan mail.

I spent a lot of time digging into the boxes and selecting dozens of samples. However, the real goldmine turned out to be a collection of unusual letters put together by Sivaji. Following instructions from the star's office, Sivaji, who happened to be the only one in the world who read every single letter received, had created this special category of letters that needed the attention of someone higher up. They not only included the odd suicide threat, plea for financial help, requests for roles from fans aspiring to be actors, but also advice on choice of films, strong criticism by disappointed unorganized fans (see Fig. 13), and descriptions of activities performed in the name of the star and photographs of the same. Photographs and letters sent by organized

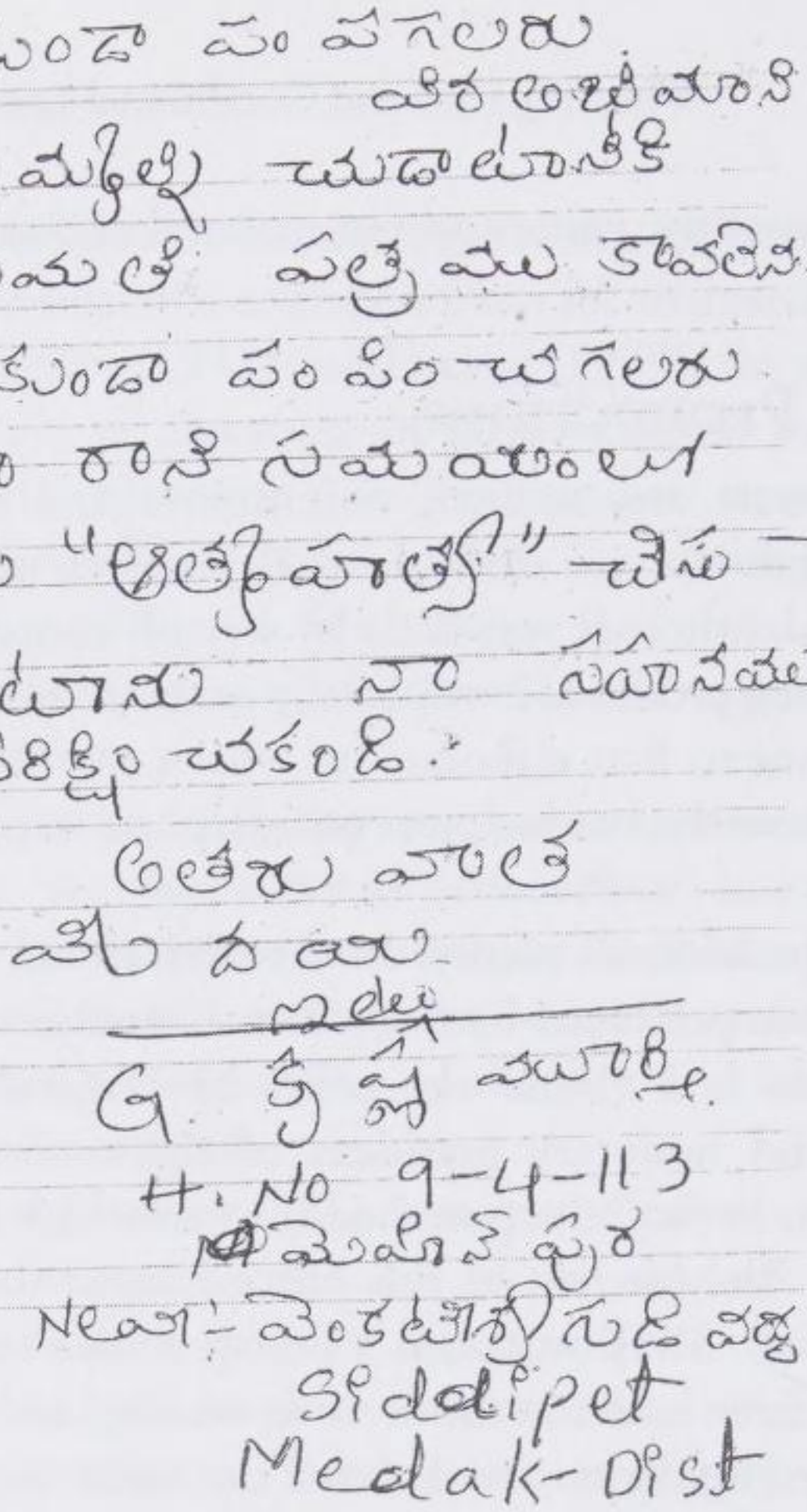

తప్పకుండా పంపగలరు
వీర అభిమాని.
మిమ్మల్ని చూడాలనుకి
అనుమతి పత్రము కావలసిన
తప్పకుండా పంపించగలరు
అలా రాని సమయంలో
*నేను "ఆత్మహత్య" చేసు
-కుంటాను నా సహనము
ను పరీక్షించకండి.
ఇట్లు
జి. కృష్ణ మూర్తి.
H. No 9-4-113
మొబైల్ ఫోన్
Near: వెంకటేశ్వర గుడి వద్ద
Siddipet
Medak-Dist

FIG. 13: Suicide threats: G. Krishna Murthy, a fan who failed to meet Chiranjeevi in Hyderabad, threatens to commit suicide if he fails to receive a letter facilitating a meeting with the star, and photographs of the star from his latest film. *Source*: CO.

fans were accorded a higher status than the routine letters, presumably for practical reasons. They were evidence of fan activity, proof of the good work that was being carried out in the star's name. They may also have allowed the star's office to take note of the more hardworking and organized groups among fans and integrate them into the state-wide network that was being formed around this time.

As for the rest of the special category of mail, they were freak letters. What distinguished these letters was not so much their unusual content but the fact that they had some *content* in addition to the routine requests that the star receives. My guess is that, after a period, these letters, too, became a part of the filed material and were put away, but that is not immediately of relevance. Interestingly, Sivaji responded to these letters, too, with a standard three line response (which only changed a little depending on whether the letter had come from a male or a female author) on a page with the star's signature (see Fig. 14). He also enclosed a photograph of Chiranjeevi from a forthcoming film (Fig. 15).

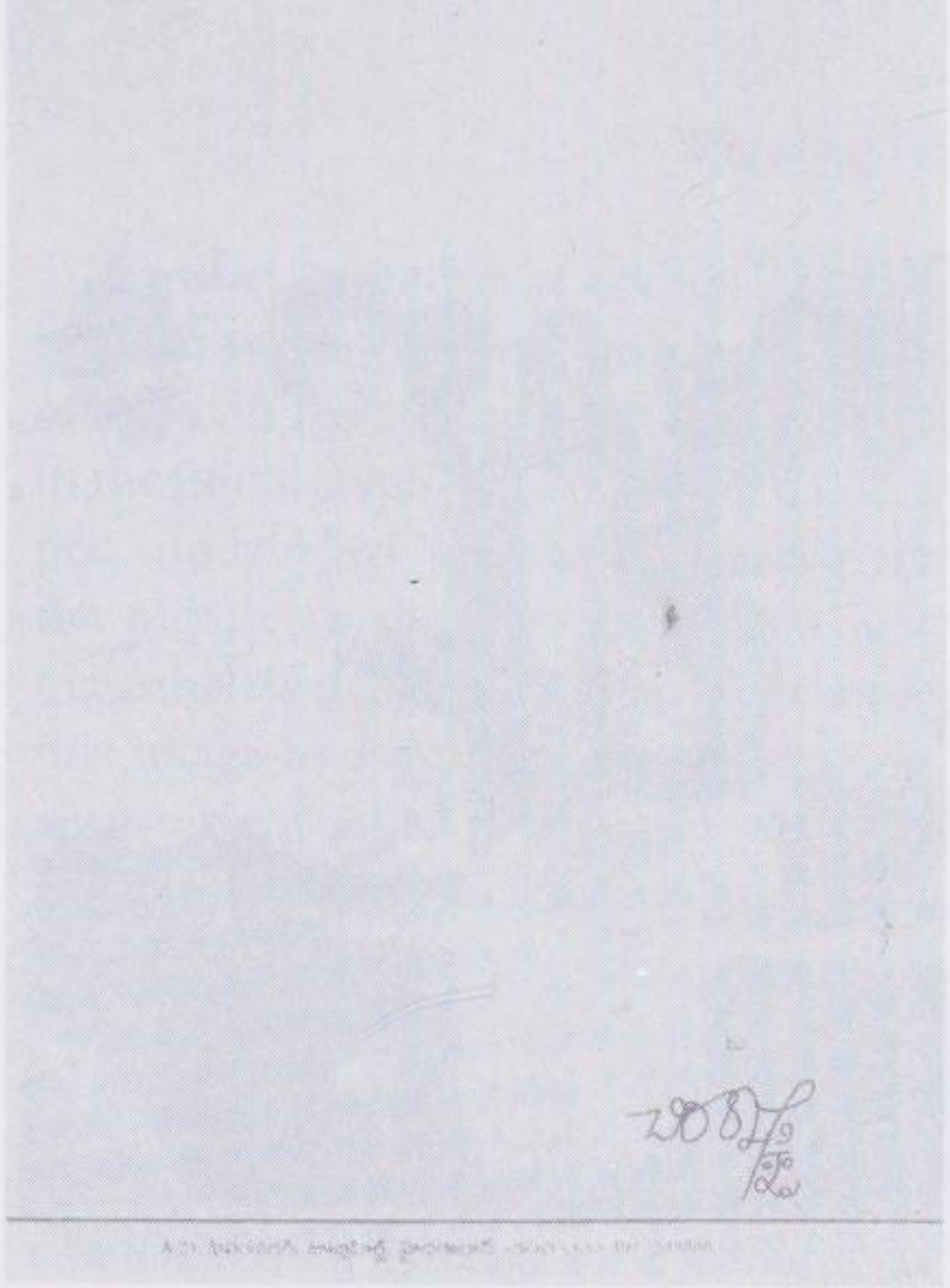


FIG. 14: The official letterhead of the star in the late 1990s.
Source: CO.

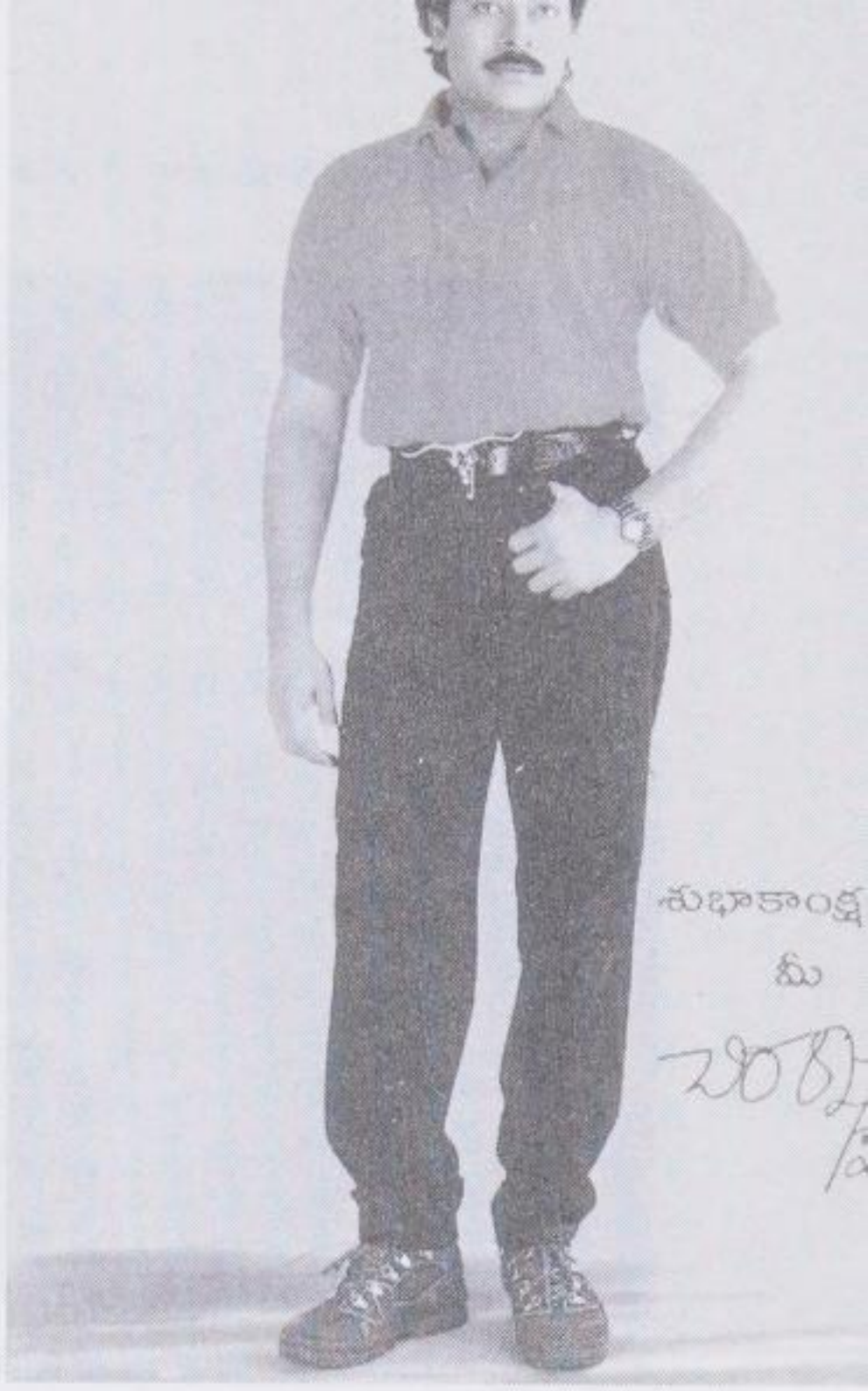


FIG. 15: Photographs like these were sent to every fan who wrote to the star.
Source: CO.

A common feature of fan photographs is the intensity of the gaze at the camera. Individual fans or groups of unorganized fans generally look directly into the camera, posing before cut-outs they have decorated, with cinema hall staff, in large groups within or just outside cinema halls, in hospitals with bewildered (or smiling) patients receiving fruit or bread, in poor-feeding camps, and so on. Association members, however, always pose in large numbers with a banner or poster indicating that serious charitable activity is being undertaken (Fig. 16).

'*Look at us, Megastar*', they seem to say, without exception. The activity performed is significant only insofar as it draws the attention of the star. The ironies of choice of the 'content' of the activity comes across most clearly in a photograph evidencing the performance of charity work performed at a blind school in Hindupur town (Fig. 17). The picture is of a group of about fifty children and some adults, presumably teachers and Chiranjeevi fans, crowded before the entrance of the school. Standing out prominently in this faded black and white photograph is a life-size poster of Chiranjeevi in the centre of the crowd. The poster comes across as spectacularly hypervisible because the children are, after all, blind. More prominent, however, is the inset of a passport size image of a young man in his twenties in the top left-hand corner of

Fig. 16: Chiranjeevi fans perform 'social service' at a hospital on the occasion of the star's 41st birthday (1996).
Source: CO.

the photograph. No doubt announcing the authorship of the activity performed, the passport size inset draws attention to itself, seeming to declare, 'I was there, acting on your behalf, acting out my cinephilia'.

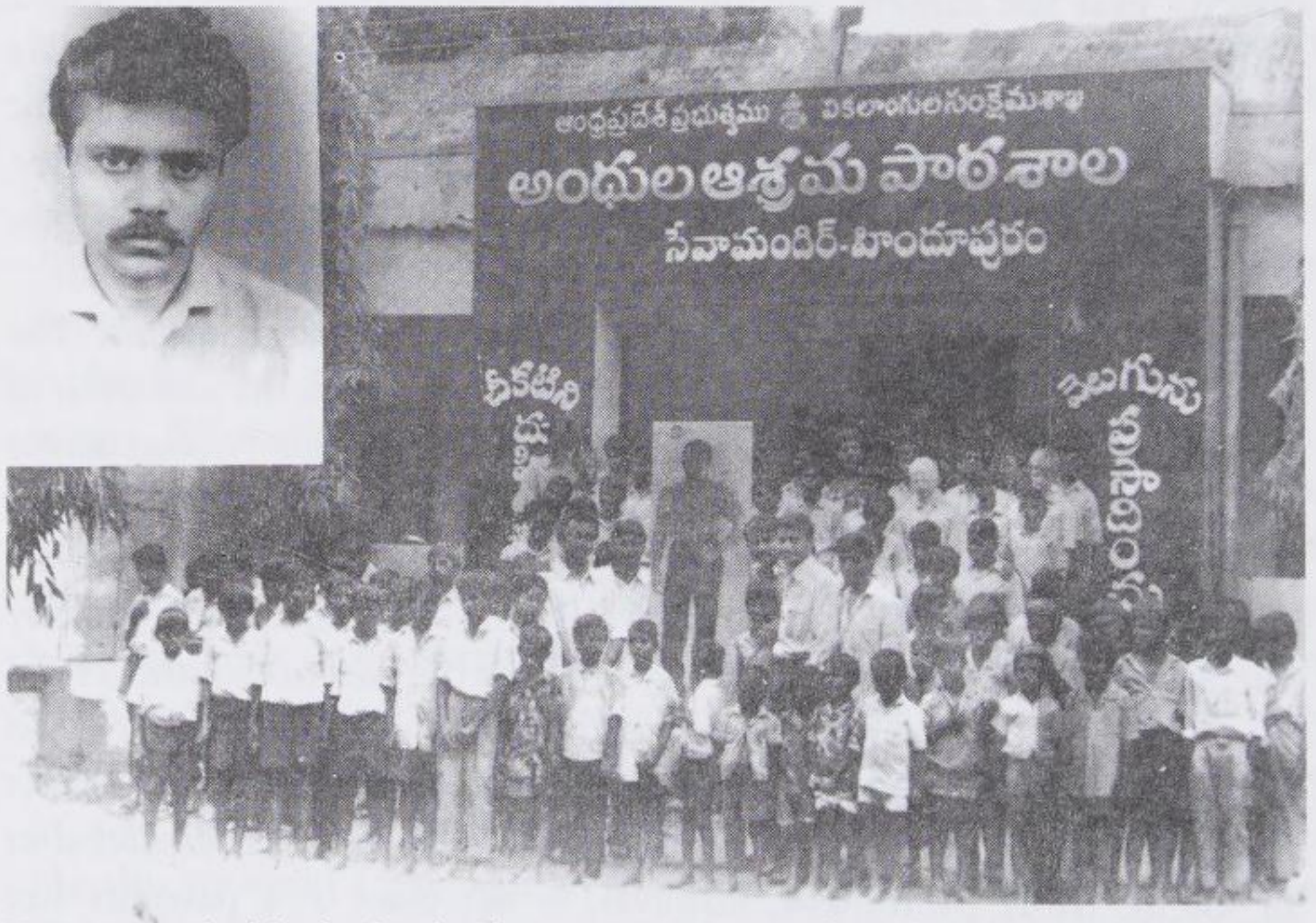
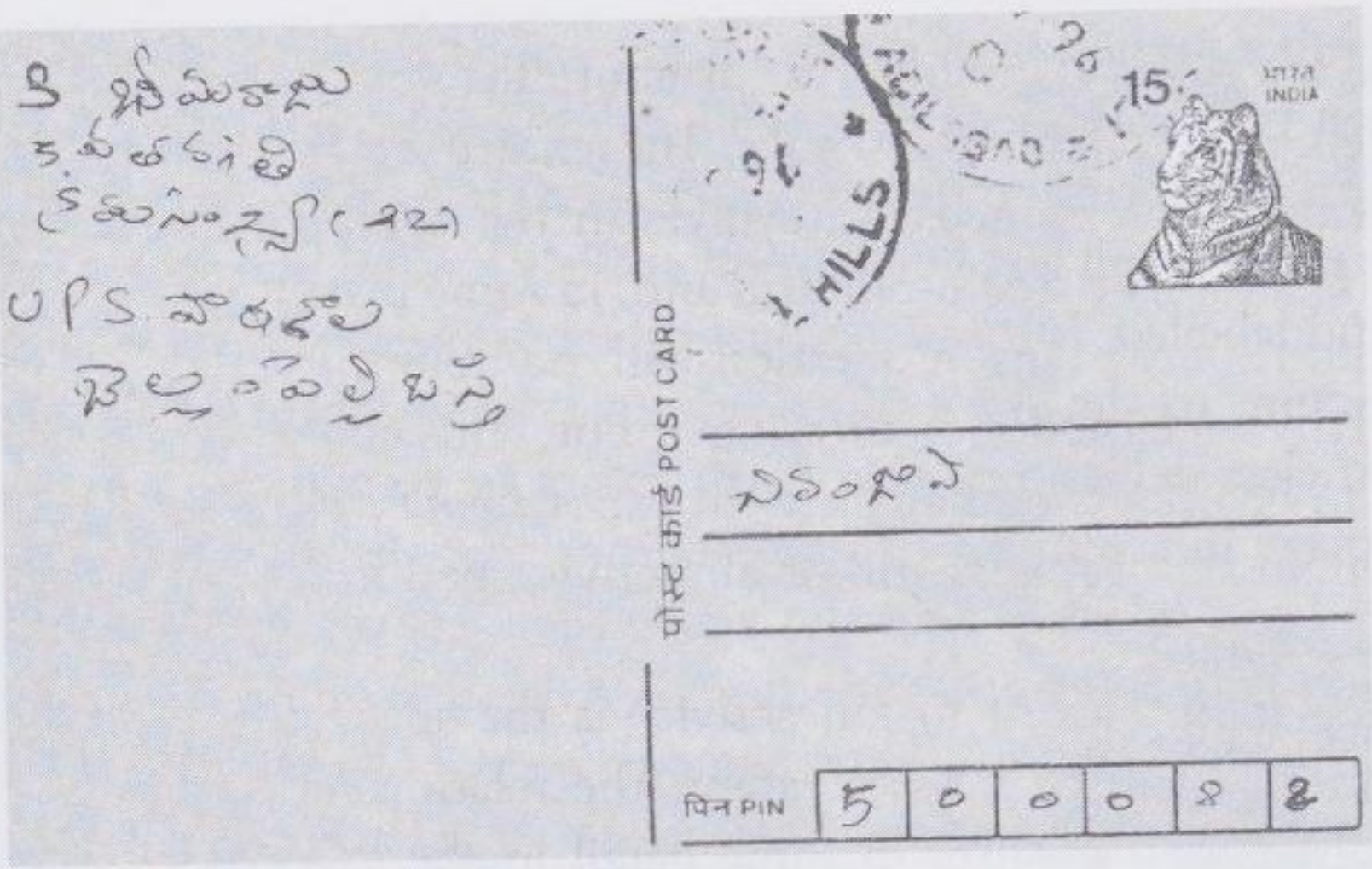


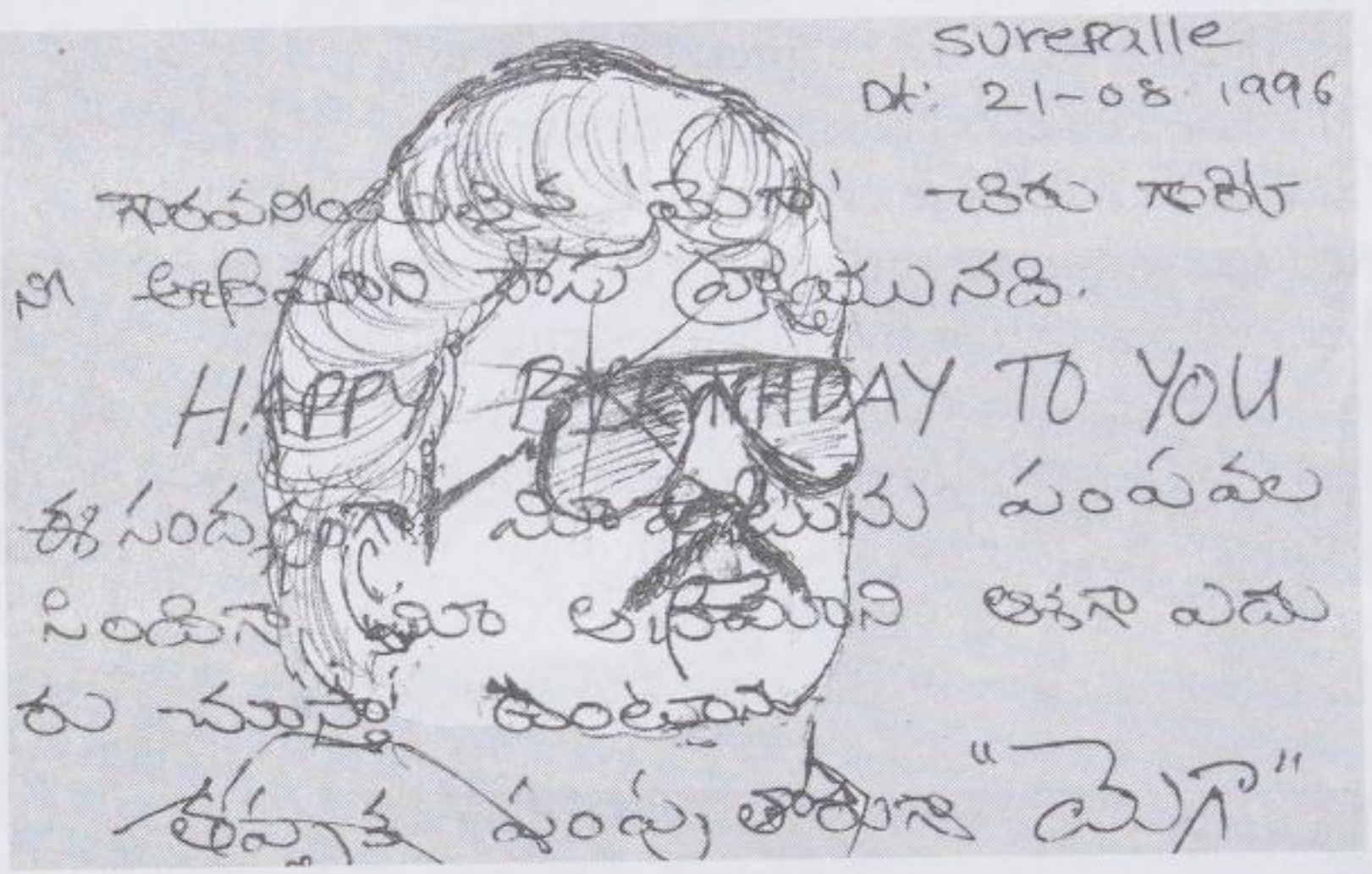
Fig. 17: At the blind school: Chiranjeevi cut out and students. Inset of the fan who performed the activity.
Source: CO.

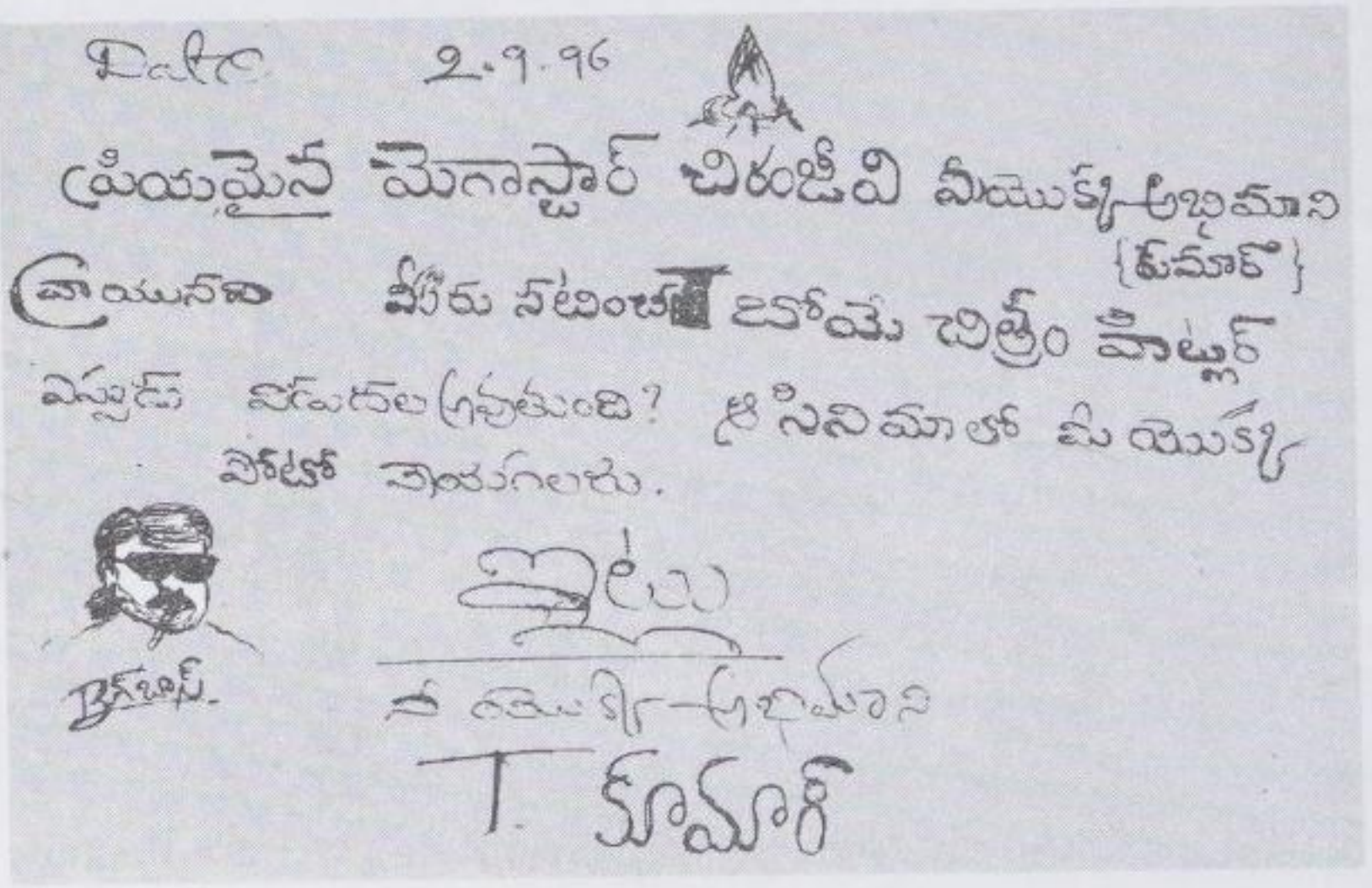
Another invitation of the star's gaze can be seen in a picture of about a dozen youths in green headbands, presumably celebrating the release of a film in the compound of a cinema hall (Fig. 18). One of the figures in the photograph has a box drawn crudely around him with a ballpoint pen and labelled 'Munna', indicating the name of the fan who has sent the picture to the star's office. He may be an agent of the star, but, nevertheless demanding that his existence be recognized. I have shown this image in a number of presentations and one question that I have always been asked is why the youth are wearing green headbands. I still do not know but let me make two guesses. First, because by the mid-1990s red, saffron, blue, and yellow had already been allotted to various political formations from which these fans might have sought to distinguish themselves. Second, purple ribbon cloth was out of stock in the neighbourhood store just then. Indeed they could well have used purple and we would still be asking the same question.

FIG. 18: Munna (extreme right) and friends.
Source: CO.

In the more obviously content-free mail—the kind that heads straight for the loft—the visual may often be absent in the communication to the star. Nevertheless, seeking recognition from the star is critical. This is evident from the post cards (not picture post cards but the legendary postal department cards) sent to the star. Most samples I have are from school children who are inmates of government welfare hostels. While some of them have drawings (of the star and other decorative images such as flowers, etc.) and a few lines about how much they like the star or his films, others simply say 'I am so and so, please write to me'.







Figs 19, 20, 21: Postcards to the star. Often the cards have incomplete addresses (Fig. 19).

Source: CO.

The fan can do anything to 'promote the star', from hoisting flags to celebrating religious festivals. The choice of fan based activity is contextually determined and evolves in the competitive environment of the fan domain. Socio-political and, in some instances, the economic aspirations of the fans in question will, no doubt, influence the choice of activity and modes of carrying it out. This spillover of aspirations needs to be understood as such—it is not *immanent* to the fan domain but would be characteristic of all activity performed by members of similar backgrounds.

What is immanent to fan activity is the specificity of the fan-star relationship and, to a lesser extent, the relationship to the cinema. I have discussed the latter in some detail in the earlier sections of this chapter. In the rest of the chapter, I will focus on interesting moments from the late 1980s, when systematic attempts were made to 'reform' fans' associations. This intervention by the star was necessitated by the repeated and consistent surfacing of the fans' notion of entitlement in a number of fan activities from theatre-centred ones to demands related to choice of film roles, duration of a film's run, etc.

Fans' associations in Andhra Pradesh associations were largely autonomous units. Nevertheless, they formed alliances and networks among themselves. In the 1980s and early 1990s, there were links between fans in different parts of the state and some degree of co-ordination

FIG. 22: Borewell sunk by the 'Central Office' of the Akhila Karnataka Rajkumar Abhimanigala Sangha, Bangalore.
Source: AKRAS.

Fig. 23: Circa 1982: Akhila Karnataka Rajkumar Abhimanigala Sangha rallies in support of the recommendations of the Gokak Committee, which recommended special measures for the promotion of Kannada language in Karnataka. Deve Gowda, who went on to become the Prime Minister of India is seen with the microphone with the president of the Sangha, Sa.Ra. Govindu on his right.
Source: AKRAS.

among them. However, even NTR associations, which had a state-level leadership that was recognized by the star himself, were really a collection of independent associations rather than units of a single organization. They were far less organized than Rajkumar fans (Figs 22 and 23). In order for fans to be 'useful' to the star or the industry in any manner, they naturally had to have a cohesive organizational structure that linked the thousands of associations. Much of the fan's working day was spent on activity that was meaningless in a different sense than the one discussed above. While fans typically attributed their activities to their commitment to protecting the star's interests, their actual utility to the star or the industry was limited, if not questionable.

From the late 1980s, Chiranjeevi effected a series of pedagogic and disciplinary moves. Other stars, including Suman, made efforts to transform the fan into a responsible admirer committed to socially purposeful activities. This exercise, I will suggest, was one of imposing not just order in the chaotic world of fans, but also *attributing meaning* to their actions. While there were many practical considerations for carrying out such an exercise, in no small part was it necessitated by the foundationally excessive nature of fan activity, which became more noticeable than before due to the proliferation of associations.

Disciplinary intervention by the star occurred in a context in which the excesses of fan activity were perceived to be a new and dangerous development. While the scale and intensity of fan activity certainly increased in the 1990s, I suggest that there was not much qualitative difference in the nature of fan activity, although it was perceived to have been tamed.

One influential reading of the situation, in the 1990s, was that fans abandoned the original, founding principle of fandom: devotion to the star. Ambati Venkateswara Rao's comments on fans in the 1990s illustrate the emerging consensus on their state of being. A Dalit Congress activist and former Krishna fan himself, Rao said that unlike in the past, fans in the 1990s were not disciplined. Motivated by selfishness and caste loyalties instead of admiration (for the star), they were interested in making money and projecting themselves as leaders. He ended his assessment by condemning their involvement in politics (Interview, Vijayawada, 9 July 1994).

The idealized notion of the fan was and continues to be invoked frequently. Vijay Bapineedu, editor of the fan magazine, *Megastar Chiranjeevi*, says, 'The fan is the only selfless supporter [there is]' (Interview, Madras, 22 January 1995). In his interviews with me, Chiranjeevi, himself, recounted incidents which, to him, were proof of his fans' devotion to him. Indeed he knew that he was a star when he 'saw devotion in the eyes of [his] audiences' (Interview, Hyderabad, 19 July 1995). Rao is, thus, not alone in arguing that there had been a deviation from the norms of fandom. The construction and projection of the true or ideal fan into the past, facilitates the argument about the degenerate fan. We need to note that the construction of the fan as devotee is deployed in the present context to condemn fans *for not being fans*. Rao's comments just about sum up why fans today are supposedly not themselves. That this condemnation should come from a Dalit and a former fan, is an indication of the wide currency of the myth of the true/ideal fan.

The exercise of defining the true fan is one of negating the actual. Rao's condemnation finds an echo in complaints about the 'criminalization' of fans by some Vijayawada based theatre owners and distributors in the 1990s. Fans were at times accused of black-marketing tickets and engaging in 'rowdyism'. However, the criminalization argument had, as its immediate referent, the period when rioting, triggered-off by the death of Ranga (1988), resulted in the destruction of a number of cinema halls either owned by Kammas or by TDP supporters. Around

this time, there were also incidents of violence against film industry property (cinema halls and distribution offices).[45]

The notion of the fan as a criminal is supported by Hari Purushottam Rao, a prominent leftist critic of Telugu cinema. He argues that FAs in the 1990s became something akin to private armies of politicians. He feels that the fan phenomenon 'reflects the lumpenization of politics since the late sixties'. The death of the true fan then coincides not only with the lumpenization of the fan but also of politics itself.[46]

There is a remarkable degree of overlap in the position of people with otherwise distinct class and professional backgrounds and political affiliations when it comes to the rowdiness of the fan. For instance, a police officer in Vijayawada, echoing distributors and film critics alike, once referred to some important Chiranjeevi fan organizers in Vijayawada as 'noted rowdy-sheeters'.[47]

The management of fans' loyalty has been, understandably, something of an issue in the career of Chiranjeevi. Around the time when Chiranjeevi established himself as the major star of Telugu cinema, and coinciding with the moment when his fans were most active, the star made his fans the target of a series of reformist initiatives. Throughout this exercise, intervention by the star was produced as an attempt to curb fan excesses, even while it systematically delegitimized the notion of (the fan's) entitlement.

A key feature of fan activity has been the transfer of agency to the star and attributing the actions of the fan to the star himself. This positioning (of the star) indicates a disavowal of the fans' own agency.[48] An examination of the star's interventions shows that the star re-positions himself vis-à-vis his fans in order to ensure that the latter does not freely function in the name of the star. By making these interventions, the star is, thus, owning up to the responsibility of being the addressee of fan activity and, in an indirect sense, to the responsibility for their activities. In effect, he responds to the fans' notion of entitlement with self-imposed obligations. They had declared that he was their idol, big brother, leader, and god. Now he has to live up to this role by ensuring that they are, in fact, acting on his behalf. The star now begins to make something of a display, or rather *production*, of his will.

As far as the star is concerned, fans' perception of themselves as guardians of the star's image is a problem. Half jokingly, Chiranjeevi said in one of his interviews, 'Even the man who pays three or four rupees [to watch a film] thinks he owns the star and has a right over

him'.[49] He went on to add that fans acquired this right because of their unqualified love for and commitment to the star. In the earlier sections, I discussed the complex nature of the fans' claim over the star's image. We have seen instances when it resulted in fans' conflicts with the distributors about how long a film should run and rare instances of fans boycotting their star's film when he disappoints them.

By transferring their agency to the star and by claiming to act in his name, fans make the star responsible for their actions. There is a parallel here between fan behaviour and Shahid Amin's (1984) discussion on how peasants in (what is now) Utter Pradesh made the iconized figure of Gandhi central to their social and political agenda. Amin points out that the peasants' 'ideas about Gandhi's "orders" and "powers" were often at variance with those of the local Congress-Khalifat leadership and clashed with the basic tenets of Gandhianism itself (p. 55). Similarly, in the context I examine, what the star *wants* his fans to do is not quite what the star *enables* them to do. Indeed, until the late 1980s, there is not much evidence to suggest that Chiranjeevi had any plans for his fans.

While it is tempting to see the gap between the mobilizer's intentions and the practices of the mobilized as a clear sign of subaltern resistance, I will avoid attributing political value to it. It is not my intention to recover the fan as a rebellious subaltern but to understand fan activity by moving out of the frames of both resistance and manipulation. As far as Chiranjeevi and his fans are concerned, soon enough in their careers, the former recognized the existence of the gap and made a series of interventions. Aswini Dutt election fiasco mentioned above, and fan rioting after the formation of Praja Rajyam suggests that, even now the situation is far from being completely 'under control'. However, it is not correct to assume that the intervention did not have consequences for fans.

Interestingly, fans themselves perceived the beginning of the moment of 'reform' as a changed attitude of the star towards them. Venugopal felt that, after the success of *Khaidi* (1983), Chiranjeevi was more welcoming of his fans and began to take interest in their activities. The turning point came in 1988 when a fan allegedly tried to poison the star during the filming of *Marana Mrudangam* (Kodandarami Reddy 1988).[50] After this incident, according to Venugopal, the star began to maintain a distance from his fans. The alleged poisoning attempt and the perceived distancing of the star from his fans coincided with the beginning of the reformist phase of Chiranjeevi's career. The perception

of change is notable because it is an indication that the late 1980s flagged-off the beginning of a new phase in the fan-star relationship.

Chiranjeevi's reformist initiative can be traced to his role in *Swayamkrushi* (K. Viswanath 1987) and includes his roles in two subsequent 'class films', and was followed by the launch of the fan magazine, *Megastar Chiranjeevi*, in 1989. The setting up of major institutions such as the centralized fan organization called State Wide Chiranjeevi Youth Welfare Association in 1995 and the Chiranjeevi Charitable Foundation (CCF) in 1998, was at once a consequence and culmination of the reformist exercise.[51]

Looking back, it is possible to suggest that the main objective of these interventions was the *cadreization of fans*, which, I see as the imposition of a stable meaning on fan activity. The norms of fandom were assembled after considerable effort and, in doing so, social and political uses were found for the hitherto wastefully expended energies of fans.

By the cadreization of fans, I am not merely implying that the fan was being prepared for the future transformation of the star into a politician. That he no doubt was. The exercise in the cadreization of fans is a fallout of the star's perception that something about fandom was blocking not only economic but also narrative possibilities. In the section below, I will focus primarily on the fan magazine *Megastar Chiranjeevi*, to show how it became the site for the production of the cadreized fan. According to its publisher Allu Aravind (producer and Chiranjeevi's brother-in-law), this was the first official fan magazine in Andhra Pradesh.[52] When the magazine first appeared, there were no fan magazines dedicated to individual stars or run commercially by people other than the star himself. Unsuccessful attempts were made in the 1990s to start unofficial/commercial Chiranjeevi fan magazines. It was only in the past five years or so, that such magazines became sustainable enough to be published on a monthly/quarterly basis. At present, both Chiranjeevi and Balakrishna, or rather the 'dynasties' they head, have unofficial fan magazines that are widely circulated.

Megastar Chiranjeevi: Reforming the Fan

The first issue of *Megastar Chiranjeevi* was published in August 1989, coinciding with the star's birthday celebrations on 22 August. Although announced as a monthly, the journal published less than half-a-dozen issues annually after 1991, and that too, on special occasions such as the star's birthday or on the occasion of the release of a film. The

fanzine ceased publication in 1995, but no formal announcement has been made on its current status or why the publication was suspended. One source said there were no chances of its revival because of its financial unviability and other problems such as the shortage of qualified editorial staff.

Between 1989 and 1995, it had an average print run of 15,000 copies, extended to 40,000 for special occasions. Usually published as three booklets, it contained at least one glossy pin-up, colour photographs, biographical notes, interviews (of the star, his producers, directors, co-stars, etc.), and fan mail. Its price ranged between Rs 15 and 20, making it the most expensive film related periodical in Telugu (popular film magazines at that time cost between Rs 3 and 5). The difference in price was so noticeable that a 'yellow' magazine raised a strong objection to the high price of the fanzine and condemned what it saw as an attempt to 'cash in on his [Chiranjeevi's] image'. The magazine alleged that *Megastar Chiranjeevi* was being given a monopoly over the star's photographs. It also went on to point out that the introduction of gate passes to the 100 day celebrations of the star's films began in 1990, and the gate pass was now bundled along with the latest issue of the magazine priced at Rs 20 (*Cine Encounter* 1990). Quite clearly, the outside chance that the fanzine had of making a profit—by cashing in on fandom—was facing resistances from the underground economy around the cinema. Despite its high price however, the magazine reportedly sustained an aggregate loss of Rs 1,50,000.[53] Its editor, Vijay Bapineedu, is a prominent director who calls himself a fan of Chiranjeevi. While faceless backroom boys were doing the actual editing, the association of Allu Aravind and Vijay Bapineedu with the magazine leaves little doubt about the publication's 'official' status.

Megastar Chiranjeevi was partly aimed at providing advance publicity to the star's forthcoming films. Almost all issues carried photographs of the star and other members of the cast of forthcoming films. Portions of the scripts were sometimes reproduced, as were lyrics of songs of films in the making. However, its concerns were not confined to advertising the star's films.

The inaugural issue of *Megastar Chiranjeevi* called for photographs of FAs along with details of the nature of social service rendered by each. These were published in the next issue. What is interesting is the emphasis, at the very inception of the magazine, on social service as the most important fan activity. However, despite this call, the later issues practically ignored social service by fans except for rare mentions.

FIG. 24: Cover of *Real Hero Suman* (June 1994 issue). In the 1990s, this was among the few official fan magazines of Telugu film stars other than *Megastar Chiranjeevi*. It was published by Suman, cheaply produced, and distributed free. *Source:* D. Devender Rao.

In fact, one of the early issues in 1989 published the photograph of a fan who had set on fire an open wound on his hand, supposedly re-enacting the action performed by the star himself in *Lankeswarudu* (1989). This was, perhaps, an indication that the star's agenda for fans had not yet fully crystallized.[54] Such a combination is unthinkable at present because, with the establishment of the State Wide Chiranjeevi Youth Welfare Association, social service became *the* official function of fans, and the only one that the star was willing to acknowledge in his communications with fans. The fanzine also devoted space and attention to projecting the star as a national level 'hero', highlighting the star's forays into Hindi cinema.

The magazine's references to theatre-centred fan activity are rare, although fans spent much energy and money on them. Given

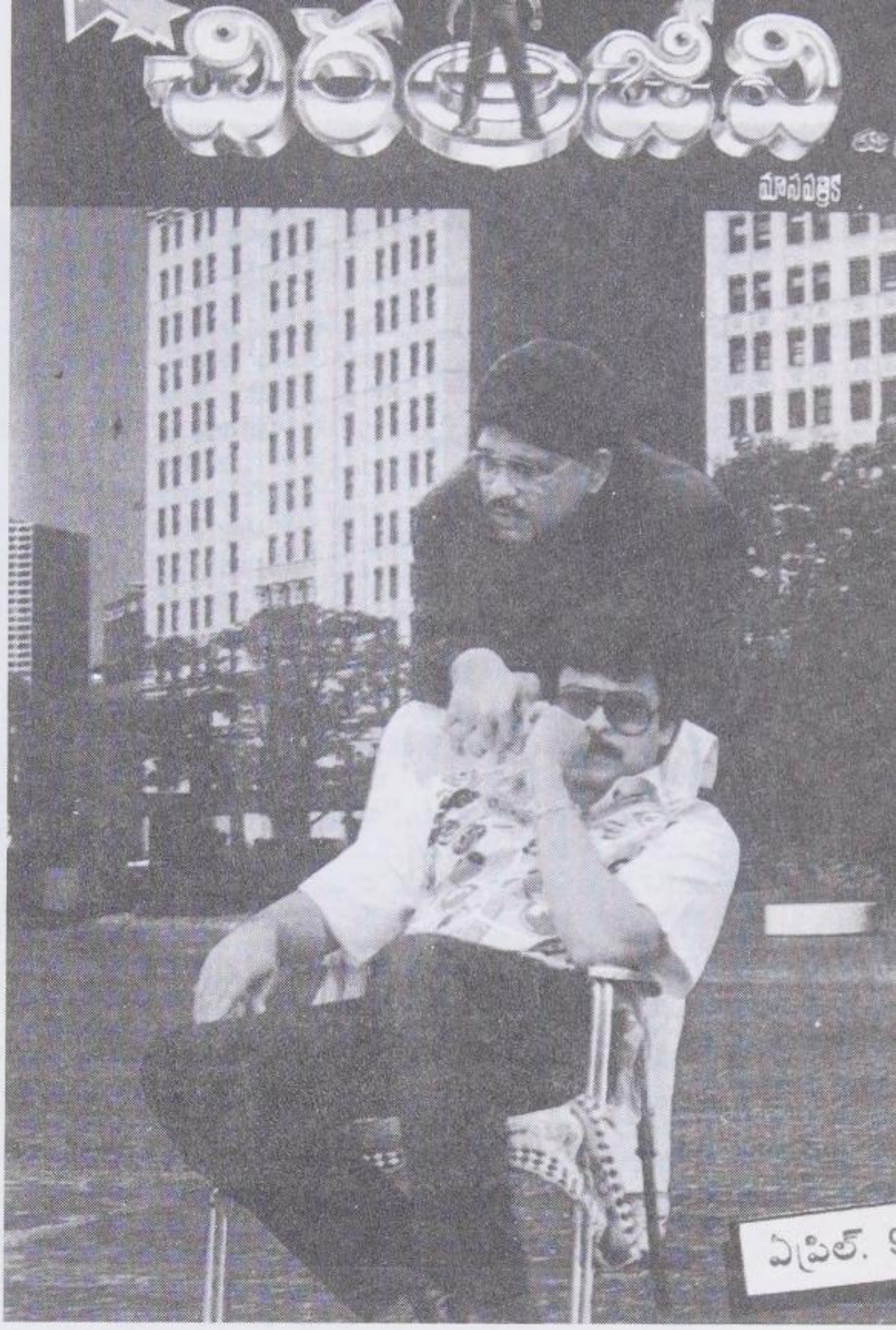


FIG. 25: Chiranjeevi and Allu Aravind on the cover of one of the three booklets of *Megastar Chiranjeevi* (April 1994). *Source:* AA.

the increasing number of complaints by distributors and theatre managements regarding fans' 'indiscipline' and 'rowdyism', the fallout of such activities, after all, this omission can be seen as an attempt to underplay their importance. Further, the omission is consonant with the realization, on the part of the industry, that publicity by fans is not responsible, to any significant degree, for a film's success. Allu Aravind, for instance, stated in an interview that the media 'hype' built up by the producers, had far greater reach than ever before in the 1990s, and made the modest posters and leaflets by fans redundant.[55]

These immediate reasons apart, the silence of the magazine regarding fans' theatre-centred activities was a result of the different construction of the fan that it attempted. This attempt is evident from the overt pedagogic efforts of the magazine. Quiz and question-answer features regularly disseminated information about the star's life and career. The

manifestations of fandom were going to be guided by the magazine, which mediated between the fan and the star, on the one hand, and fans themselves, on the other.

The first step of the pedagogic exercise, understandably, was to produce/reinforce the constructions of the star as a great, generous, and considerate person. The inaugural issue, deploying hyperbole—the most common rhetorical device adopted by fans themselves—declared that Chiranjeevi was a 'Megastar', explaining that 'mega' meant ten raised to the power of six. 'If anyone in the industry imagines himself to be ten times greater than others, Chiranjeevi is many times greater than him,' reads the explanation for the star's honorific title. Later issues, like other existing productions including those by fans, tried to construct a real-hero figure by collapsing the screen and off-screen Chiranjeevi. This technique of star production has already received critical attention in different parts of the world (for example Dyer 1991). I discuss it in some detail in the later chapters. We learn that Chiranjeevi was generous and concerned for the poor, brave even in the face of death, and deeply moved by the misfortunes of his fans. The July 1991 issue, for instance, chronicled his concern for the victims of a cyclone (which included the donation of a large sum of money). In the January 1994 issue, he was presented as the bravest survivor of a plane-crash, who rushed other survivors to safety and, in general, took control of the situation.[56] In the January 1993 issue, the star was shown with a fan, who had lost both his legs in an accident while travelling to watch the star's latest film. The fan was reported as having said that the star had promised financial help for him to set up his own business, once he had learnt to walk with the artificial legs donated by the star.

But this technique of collapsing the screen and 'real' images, which happens to be the most widely used ones in the inventory for the production of the star's 'image(s)' in Chiranjeevi's case, could and often does produce unexpected results; especially when applied randomly or injudiciously to incompatible elements of the respective semiotic sets. The official fanzine, therefore, delegitimizes certain uses of the technique. I wish to briefly discuss two instances in which fans were imparted training in image making.

To generalize the issue beyond the world of Chiranjeevi fans, themselves, the problem was one of the fan's *credulousness*.[57] The credulous fan was no doubt useful, because here was someone who was apparently willing to believe that screen heroics were for real. On the other hand,

Fig. 26: A glimpse of the 'real' Chiranjeevi as he poses with his son, Ramcharan Tej on the back cover of one of the booklets of *Megastar Chiranjeevi* (June 1992). *Source:* AA.

the very credulousness of this entity effectively cut off certain *narrative possibilities*. Notice for example the impossibility of major south Indian superstars dying on screen. The fan is a vocal opponent of such acts of indifference to the spectator's excessive investment in the fictional universe, but the problem, itself, is not limited to fans and is, in fact, characteristic of film cultures in India as a whole. The issue was of immediate interest and concern to the magazine, which was playing the risky game of encouraging credulousness. An opportunity to settle the issue, once and for all, by demarcating a line between useful and meaningless forms of credulousness came in the form of a complaint by a fan.

In April 1992, *Megastar Chiranjeevi* published a letter from an angry fan and Chiranjeevi's signed response. The fan was scandalized and angry that the actress Nagma addressed Chiranjeevi abusively during a song, '*Yendi be ettaaga vundi*' in *Gharana Mogudu* (K. Raghavendra Rao 1992, unreleased at the time). The fan sought the withdrawal of the song as it damaged the image of the 'Megastar's Natakishore' (a play on two of the actor's titles). Fans of other stars were ridiculing the song, the letter said, to the extent that the author felt insulted and wanted to die.[58]

Chiranjeevi's response asserted that it was only in the 'acting' that he was insulted, and not in real life. *In the film*, the abuse is addressed to the character's husband Raja, not to Chiranjeevi, the person. 'Watch *Gharana Mogudu*', he pleaded, 'even after doing so if you feel the song denigrates me, write to me'. It is not easy for a real life hero to emerge if we separate the star as a 'real life' individual from the roles he plays, particularly when the magazine, itself, had invited readers to draw parallels between the star's life and films. The message of the star's response was that fans should not commit the blunder of *unauthorized comparisons* between the real and fictional. By extension, their activities should not adopt forms that were not legitimate. Chiranjeevi added:

> Don't pick fights with fans of other stars. It is not good to do so. *I have said so a number of times*. Here [in the industry] all the heroes [English word used to refer to stars] are very friendly and cordial with each other. You fans, being the admirers of such heroes, should not abuse each other.
>
> So, hereafter, *I hope you will be an admirer I admire*. Don't even think of committing suicide (emphasis added).

The admirer Chiranjeevi admires, the good/true fan, is one who responds to the star's signal ('I have said so a number of times' and you should have acted accordingly). Notice, also, that in the star's response, the fights with other stars' fans are taken more seriously than the suicide threat, which, in Andhra Pradesh of the 1990s, was little more than an expression of anger or frustration, rather than a prelude to actual suicide.[59]

However, the fan's perceived claim over the star's image (evident from the simplicity and directness of the demand to delete the song from the film) is at the bottom of the problem. This notion of entitlement is inter-linked with the fan's refusal to accord fictional status to the song and his insistence on remaining credulous. The multiple manifestations of the credulous spectator are far too complex to be discussed here any further. I will return to it in the later chapters but, for the moment, I will stay with the magazine.

From the June 1992 issue, frequent references were made to Chiranjeevi's image as a hero of the masses and the supposed problems arising due to it. The June 1992 issue reported Chiranjeevi's angry retort to a certain Punjabi woman, an army Major's wife, during the shooting of *Aaj ka Goondaraj* (Ravi Raja Pinisetty 1992, the Hindi remake of the star's *Gangleader*). Apparently, Chiranjeevi was piqued by her comment

that she pitied Chiranjeevi, Amitabh Bachchan, and Rajnikant, who played only stereotyped roles. 'Why don't you act in art films?', the Megastar was asked. Chiranjeevi reportedly replied that his films were meant for the masses, toilers who watch a film to forget their worries, not the 'class audience' like her, comprising of less than 5 per cent of the audience, who, in any case watch films on video, not in the theatres. After her departure, however, Chiranjeevi confessed to the reporter that he did, in fact, want to play roles with a difference, but his audience hated such experiments. The article concluded by quoting Chiranjeevi, 'Maybe I will make my own films if the urge to do artistic class films increases ... let us see'.

This was followed by Chiranjeevi's first person narrative (*Megastar Chiranjeevi*, August 1992) in which he stated that acquiring a 'star-image' was greater than being appreciated by critics. The statement, which came in the wake of the phenomenal success of *Gharana Mogudu* and even as the 'class film' *Aapadbandhavudu* was being made, went on to assert that he was being cast in stereotyped roles, and it was thus very difficult for him to exhibit his acting abilities. He regretted that the audience rejected his offbeat roles in films like *Chiranjeevi* (C.V. Rajendran 1985) and *Aradhana* (Bharatiraja 1987), even before he had acquired his current star status.

Unease with what we may call the 'image problem' was to find clear articulation in the April 1993 issue, only months after the relatively poor commercial performance of *Aapadbandhavudu*, a film that was actively boycotted by fans in some places. Chiranjeevi asked his fans the following question:

> I need not tell you that I have an 'image' [English word used] as an artiste. It is being said that despite the best efforts of a director, people do not appreciate any role that does not conform to this image. Is it healthy for an actor to be framed by an image? Should I bow to the audience's opinion and reproduce the image in my roles? Or is it better for me to do a couple of films in which roles do not conform to the image and instead give me the opportunity to exhibit my talent and earn a name [as a good actor]?

The question therefore was whether fans, who had failed to respond to the star's signal vis-à-vis class films, were prepared for a display of his acting skills. The unstated injunction was that they should support his class films, and the question was framed in such a way ('is it healthy?') as to anticipate the 'correct' response. Ample evidence exists, even in the pages of *Megastar Chiranjeevi*, that the star was desirous of doing

offbeat 'talent oriented' roles (cf. *Megastar Chiranjeevi*, June 1992, cited above).

Not surprisingly, most of the responses published went along with Chiranjeevi (*Megastar Chiranjeevi*, June 1993). The star received overwhelming support from those who wrote in, to go ahead with his experiment. Of the three FAs, whose representatives responded, only one wanted him to continue doing 'mass roles' without trying to alter his image. Nobody suggested that he give up 'mass attraction films' (which was not the question anyway). Less than a third of the eighteen respondents felt that he should stick to so called action films.

How should we understand the support for class films in a *fan* magazine, at a time when the star's 'imageless' roles were being rejected in favour of the supposedly stereotyped ('mass attraction') roles? In part, the way the question was framed determined the response. But more importantly, the response is an indication of the success of *Megastar Chiranjeevi's* intervention in the fan domain. The magazine entered the domain of fans as a bearer of the star's opinion and the discussion on meaningful films coincided with mainstream film journalism's promotion of his class films, as films that appeal to sophisticated viewers ('class audience') and not the mass audience. The magazine attempted to bring about a splitting of the (ideal) fan and non-fan (marked by undesirable excesses). This was to be replicated in another split between the fans and the mass audience, with fans identifying with middle class taste, instead of with the mass audience. The fan magazine's didactic thrust was supplemented by the star's statements in other film magazines and had the effect of ensuring that fans, at least in public, dissociated themselves from the rest of the mass audience which was perceived to exist externally, beyond the realm of fans.

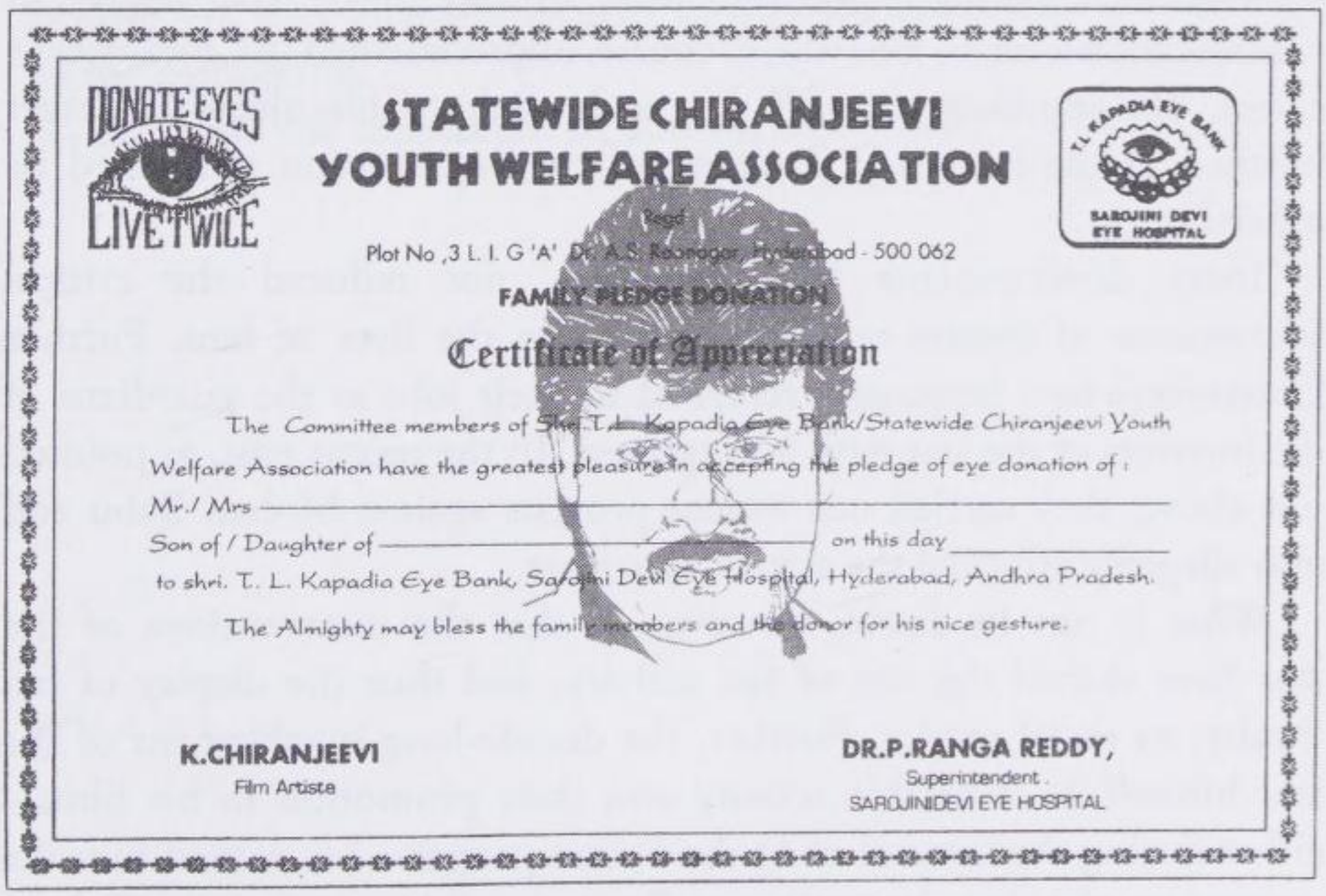
Evidence of the magazine's work is also seen in what fans declare to be their favourite films. Most fans I met claimed that their favourite Chiranjeevi films included at least two class films. There was also a striking mismatch between the list of five best films and the most watched films of the star *by the same fan*. When I spoke to them about the mismatch between their best and most watched films, they claimed defensively that they watched their favourite class films as many times as the other films on their other lists. No doubt their response was partly shaped by my status as an outsider to their world.[60]

All this is not to claim that the magazine was an unqualified success, commercial or otherwise. Indeed, the focus of the star's intervention, itself, shifted from the magazine, whose publication could not be

sustained for long, to other sites of rather more direct involvement. With the establishment of the State Wide Chiranjeevi Youth Welfare Association in 1995, the unfinished task of cadreizing the fan was taken up again.

Fans Reformed

With the formation of the apex body of Chiranjeevi fans in 1995, it became mandatory for all fans' associations of the star to register with this body in order to be officially recognized. Eye donation (or rather getting fans and others to pledge their eyes) became the most important official activity of the state body. Fans were also regularly mobilized to donate blood, plant trees, carry out disaster relief, etc. Until this point of time, charitable activities were carried out on special occasions, especially the star's birthday, and were in the nature of a series of one-off actions.[61] Ironically, the moves to develop a state wide organization acquired an immediacy in the wake of the *Alluda Majaka* controversy in the summer of 1995 (discussed in Chapter 4), when there was a widespread belief among fans that a conspiracy had been hatched to destroy the star's career. Around this time, the number of releases featuring Chiranjeevi reduced from three to four a year, to one or, at best, two a year. It was as if social service was going to keep them occupied through the rest of the year, when there were no films of their star to watch/promote.


DONATE EYES LIVE TWICE

STATEWIDE CHIRANJEEVI YOUTH WELFARE ASSOCIATION

Regd.

Plot No ,3 L. I. G 'A' Dr. A.S. Rao nagar, Hyderabad - 500 062

T. L. KAPADIA EYE BANK

SAROJINI DEVI EYE HOSPITAL

FAMILY PLEDGE DONATION

Certificate of Appreciation

The Committee members of Shri T. L. Kapadia Eye Bank/Statewide Chiranjeevi Youth Welfare Association have the greatest pleasure in accepting the pledge of eye donation of :

Mr./ Mrs _____

Son of / Daughter of _____ on this day _____

to shri. T. L. Kapadia Eye Bank, Sarojini Devi Eye Hospital, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh.

The Almighty may bless the family members and the donor for his nice gesture.

K.CHIRANJEEVI
Film Artiste

DR.P.RANGA REDDY,
Superintendent .
SAROJINIDEVI EYE HOSPITAL

Fig. 27: Certificate of Appreciation issued to fans who pledge their eyes. *Source:* SWCYWA.

DONATE EYES
LIVE TWICE

CHIRANJEEVI
YOUTH WELFARE ASSOCIATION
(Regd.)
Plot No. 3, LIG : A- Dr. A.S. Rao Nagar, E.C.I.L. Post, Hyderabad-62.

Letter of Thanks

The members of the Committee of Eye Bank are grateful to the family members of Smt/Sri _____ for kindly donating her/his eyes on her/his death on _____, and thus giving lead in such humanitarian work.

The persons who have regained their lost sight after grafting of these eyes, will always remember this benevolent and priceless gift.

DR. P. RANGA REDDY,
Superintendent, Sanjini Devi Eye Hospital.

K. CHIRANJEEVI
Film Artist.

Fig. 28: Letter of Thanks issued to the family members of fans who pledge their eyes.
Source: SWCYWA.

Chiranjeevi made it a point to encourage and publicly endorse the charitable activities of the State Chiranjeevi Youth. In the space of a couple of years, Chiranjeevi himself, or members of his family, attended a number of public events organized by this body. This degree of identification with his fans was, of course, unprecedented in Chiranjeevi's career. The appointment of K. Nagendra Babu, Chiranjeevi's younger brother, as the honorary president of the organization reinforced its official status.

These developments have, however, not reduced the critical importance of theatre-centred activities in the lives of fans. Further, Chiranjeevi fans frequently returned to their jobs as the guardians of the interests of the star with a vengeance. In the recent past, as pointed out above, they carried out violent protests against Mohan Babu and also allegedly attacked the actor Rajasekhar.

What is not in doubt, however, is that the interventions of the star have shifted the site of fan activity, and thus the display of fan loyalty, to social service. Further, the decade-long involvement of the star himself in charitable activity and their promotion in his films—either during the interval or in the fiction proper—has earned him the reputation of being the most socially responsible amongst the Telugu industry's stars.

This history was no doubt most useful when Chiranjeevi announced the formation of his political party. However, if the entire series of initiatives, from *Megastar Chiranjeevi* to the establishment of the Praja Rajyam Party, were part of a grand design, it would seem that its implementation was far from perfect.

The sublimation of fandom into social service and the possibility of its later transformation into political activism, are not to be seen as stages of evolution of the fan. 'Meaningless' activities continue to be performed and indeed necessitate the imposition of structures of signification, which are also structures that attempt to transform the fan from his state of obscene enjoyment of the cinema into a being whose loyalty is both predictable and useable.

Given fandom, can the star avoid becoming a politician? For this transformation of the star will no doubt ensure that a purpose is readily available for fan activity. If the evolution of Chiranjeevi into a politician is predictable on many counts, so is the persistence of fan excesses. On 5 September 2008, even as Chiranjeevi's party was getting down to the mundane business of putting the election campaign in place, hundreds of the star's fans turned up at the party office and went on a rampage, which one paper compared to the actions of Lord Ram's army of apes in Lanka (*Andhra Jyothi*, 6 September 2008: 1). They repeatedly insisted that the star appear before them and address them (which he did), and then demanded that they shake hands with him, etc. When they were obstructed, they attacked security guards and also broke the main gate of the compound.

What has the cinema got to do with any of this?

PART II

2

After NTR
Telugu Mass Film and Cinematic Populism

In the previous chapter, I discussed the critical importance of the social history of the cinema hall. Now I will focus on films, which are, after all, the reason why the populace gathers before the screen. In my examination of the films of Chiranjeevi, I will ask if there is anything at all in these films that can give us insights into the 'excessive' responses we encountered in the previous chapter. While I have suggested that these responses are usefully located as cinephiliac, the task of demonstrating their relationship to the screen remains.

In this chapter and the rest of the book, I examine the Telugu film 'genre' locally known as the mass film, which was, by far, the most influential and economically important genre in the Telugu film industry in the 1980s and 1990s. Chiranjeevi is closely identified with the mass film but all other major Telugu stars of his generation featured in films of this genre. The mass film is useful for opening up the question of how the cinema may be political. This question will be an important focus of my discussion of the genre. Furthermore, in the mid-1990s the mass film and its stars became a part of a major crisis in the Telugu film industry. The crisis was, in part, a result of the collapse of the mass film, as also its past success. The examination of the mass film allows us to see how populism and blockage dovetail and in turn implicate Telugu cinema's superstars.

This chapter is in two parts. In the first, I discuss mass film's formal and thematic concerns, while drawing attention to Chiranjeevi's rise from a minor actor to the industry's biggest star. In the second part, I will make an argument about populism immanent to the cinema, once again

focusing on the mass film. Throughout the discussion, Chiranjeevi's career will provide the examples that support the argument. However, while Chiranjeevi is critical for the argument, the argument itself is about film spectatorship as the key to the working of populist cinema.

The Mass Film

The study of the 'Chiranjeevi phenomenon', in its screen manifestation, is a study of the mass film. Situating the star against the backdrop of the mass film also allows me to avoid individualizing him and making an exception of him. On the contrary, I would like to argue that Chiranjeevi is very much a product of his times and has much in common with stars who came before and after him. Just as the Chiranjeevi fan would have much in common with the Balakrishna fan, the 'Chiranjeevi film' and 'Balakrishna film', in spite of their distinguishing features, would be remarkably similar. To begin with, they are likely to be mass films.

It is useful to divide Chiranjeevi's film career into three phases. The first phase covers the five years period from 1978 to 1983, when he was struggling to establish himself. The second, corresponding with the release of *Khaidi* and coinciding with NTR's election as Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, extends from 1983 to 1997 (1995 really, because no films of his were released in 1996), when he established himself as the most important star of the industry. Towards the end of this period, he began to face a number of challenges. The third phase extends from 1997, when Chiranjeevi re-established himself as the industry's biggest star, to 2008, when he announced the formation of the Praja Rajyam Party. In this chapter and the next, I examine the first two phases of Chiranjeevi's career, focusing mostly on films from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, the long decade of the Telugu mass film. In Chapter 5, I discuss his post-1997 work.

Before I go any further, a few clarifications are in order. The mass film, as a journalistic term, has considerable judgmental value. To categorize a film as a mass film, is to condemn it. If, in any piece written for readers familiar with Telugu film criticism (written in either Telugu or English), I were to say that the 1980s is the decade of the mass film, the statement would be taken to mean that the eighties is a period in which Telugu cinema degenerated hopelessly. It implies terming the 1980s as the decade of vulgarity, tastelessness, obscenity, etc. As a journalistic category, the mass film existed before the 1980s: for example, some of NTR's more 'vulgar' works of the 1970s. However, it was in the 1980s,

that the category acquired prominence enough to assess and evaluate popular Telugu cinema. This development is certainly related to the industry's use of the term to describe its products, but it is also due to the *need* for a concept to render intelligible a widespread perception that there were disturbing changes not only in the domain of fans but also in the general film viewing population. These were apparently in response to something that was happening on the screen and that which caused them, which gradually became known as the mass film.

Specifically, the 'mass film' is thus a loose film industry and journalistic term that refers to films that presumably address or target the masses, and is degenerate for this reason. A newspaper article explains that 'mass' (in the mass film) connotes 'multitudes . . . adulation . . . worship' and goes on to list the formulaic elements associated with the genre: big budgets, stars in superhuman roles, lack of novelty of storyline, etc. (Kannababu 2005). Through the 1980s and 1990s, mass film was used in contradistinction to the 'class film,' which, in turn, presumably addressed middle class audiences.

The mass film's career, as an industrial term, implies that the referent has an existence outside journalistic discourse. Film star Krishna is reported to have described one of his films as a 'mass *chitram*' (mass film) that did average business (*Super Hit*, 27 June 2003).[1] Such references go to show that the term could be used to stand for big budget films featuring major stars. These films would purportedly be meant for the 'masses', characterized by their poverty, cultural inferiority, cheap tastes, low levels of intelligence, etc. Like children's films or women's fiction, its addressee would define the mass film as a distinct category. As for the masses themselves, a great deal of commercial Indian cinema would be produced for this elusive entity. The addressee assumes importance because the intended viewer and his/her tastes and concerns supposedly determine both form and content of films. But to the industry, the masses also connote the sum total of the film market, and consequently, the mass film is also used to describe films meant for the populace *in general*, not specific segments of the film market.

Mass Film as Genre

Genre, as has been noted by film scholars like M. Madhava Prasad (1998) and Lalitha Gopalan (2003) in the past, is a complicated category in the Indian context. Not that it is without problems in other contexts, but, here, we runin to a wider variety of complications. Historically, the social (any film set in the contemporary setting) emerged in

contradistinction to the mythological (stories of gods, sourced from the epics and the puranas). The latter was the dominant genre in both silent as well as early sound cinema, especially in Telugu, where it was made long after it became obscure in other industries. Prasad argues that the social, effectively *prevented* the development of individual genres. The industry was, in fact, interested in ensuring that the audience was not disaggregated (see Prasad 1998: 117–37). In Telugu cinema, the rise of the social was accompanied by the decline of other film forms (mythological, historical, and folklore film) and the process by which the social became the predominant industrial genre can be said to have been completed only in the 1970s.[2]

With the disappearance of the other 'genres', the social itself has become a redundant category. However, till very recent times (when films likened to Hollywood genres began to be made), the distinction between different kinds of social films appeared somewhat arbitrary. The Telugu film critic, K. Narasaiah, for example, listed the following trends in the formula films of the period under his consideration (mid-1980s): 'teenage films, sadist films, sex films, crime films, violent films … superstitious films, invigorating films … moralizing films, films encouraging immorality, cheap films … folklore films, mythological films … sloganeering films … musical films' (1986: 176–7). Narasaiah's catalogue indicates that even in the 1980s, Telugu film critics did not have a notion of genre that went beyond industrial terms such as folklore film, mythological, and, of course, the social. The attempt to create sub-categories within the social falls apart because Narasaiah continues to work with easily identifiable older categories, while attempting to account for a number of emerging tendencies that were subsumed under the category of the social, but were, nevertheless, perceived to be internally differentiated. So, while it is clear what he means by folklore films, his category of the cheap films is indeed a puzzling one, and all the more so, because he also has 'sex films' and 'films encouraging immorality' as separate categories. Amusing as Narasaiah's exercise seems, the problem he encounters is not unique to Telugu cinema.

The Hindi film industry trade journal, *Trade Guide*, has for example this editorial contribution to make to the debate on genre in our context: '… the forthcoming week will witness the release of four films, all belonging to different genres *Hadh Kar Di Aapne* (comedy), *Gang* (action), *Halo* (children), and *Heerabai* (low-budget)' (8 April 2000: 20). Clearly, the industry's classification is not based on formal elements but on the economic logic that goes into the assembling of films—a

logic that is evidently aimed at identifying audience categories for which a film is intended.

After the disappearance of the older companion genres of the social (mythological, etc.), we may now need to abandon the social itself as it is no longer a useful category, encompassing virtually the sum total of all the films made at present. The identification and discussion of the dominant as well as emerging tendencies since the 1980s is beyond this book's brief. I will only state that the mass film is the most crucial generic tendency within the social in the post-mythological era (late 1970s and early 1980s, to be more precise). There are obvious difficulties in calling the mass film a genre, since the category of the mass film includes a variety of tendencies that might themselves be termed genres: certain 'action' films, ruralist melodramas, the occasional western, and costume drama. Insofar as it is a supra-generic entity, rather than a genre in the usual sense of the term, the mass film is similar to the 'social'.

The mass film thus involves big budgets and major stars, and attempts to cater to the widest possible spectrum of the film market. I further suggest that for a variety of historical reasons, the mass film became identified with a set of themes, but, more importantly, with modes of spectatorial address and a political mandate.

The mass film needs to be seen as a genre also because:

> Genres do not consist solely of films. They consist also of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process. The systems provide spectators with means of recognition and understanding. They help render individual films, and the elements within them, intelligible and, therefore, explicable (Neale 2000: 31).

Paul Willemen's (2005: 227) point that the so-called expectations from a genre could well be a consequence of marketing strategies of the film industry is a necessary supplement to Neale's statement. Careful attention thus needs to be paid to claims made on behalf of a genre by the industry and the evidence provided by films themselves.

The mass film, especially in the 1980s and early 1990s, had major stars playing roles of common people who were representatives of the masses. The heroes of the mass film engage in a battle against upper class/caste villains who are the enemies of the state and society. In the genre, class and caste dynamics are further fused with gender politics. Highly masculine lower class/caste men carry the class war into the interpersonal domain by either aligning with sexually aggressive lower

class women to fight a common rich enemy (for example, *Gangleader*), or tame the rich man's arrogant daughter and marry her to ensure the resolution of social and economic contradictions (for example, *Gharana Mogudu*). The mass film has close parallels with the vehicles of Rajnikant in Tamil, whose major hits were either dubbed into Telugu or remade. Rajnikant also featured in remakes of Telugu mass films on occasion. The Bachchan vehicle in Hindi is a precursor for the mass film, but it was also mediated by the Telugu remakes featuring NTR.[3]

Industrial Context

A key distinguishing feature of the mass film is the absolute centrality of the star to the narrative, as well as, to the business model of the film. While the mass film came into wide circulation as both a descriptive as well as abusive term in the mid to late 1980s, the formal and thematic features as well as the industrial logic can be seen as early as *Adavi Ramudu* (K. Raghavendra Rao 1977) and *Yama Gola* (T. Rama Rao 1977). These were films in which the NTR character is seen mobilizing the masses and also fighting on their behalf against oppressors. As early as the 1960s, there were signs that the Telugu film industry was relying on male stars for attracting investment into the production sector, which routinely made more flops than hits, and was therefore critically dependent on new investments to simply get on with the business of making films.[4] Around this time, it was being said that the *hero-dwayam* (star twosome), as NTR and ANR were being called by the film press, were so important for the industry that films were being made, essentially by using up call-sheets of these stars rather than on the basis of stories, etc. (Murthy 1963).

Telugu cinema's stars from the 1960s were able to indefinitely defer the crisis that logically ought to have resulted from the production sector's inability to recover costs. This they did by propping up a production model that relied on channelling surplus generated from various activities unrelated to the film industry into film production. NTR's pre-1983 vehicles, as well as films of other stars of this period, put in place a representational front end of this industrial model. This worked well till 1983. After TDP was voted to power, the industry had to address the issue of how the NTR model of stardom, or rather the kind of stardom of which NTR was the chief example, could be consolidated at a time when the star himself was no longer available.

Coinciding with NTR's election, we witness a remarkable development. *Representational techniques identified with established stars began*

to be deployed to shore up the fortunes of relative new comers and to create new stars. The implications of such a deployment are not evident from a mechanistic understanding of genre, since, formally or thematically speaking, there is more continuity than change between the NTR vehicle and films made after his exit. In order to capture the complexity of the transformation of Telugu cinema after NTR's election and withdrawal from the industry (he continued to act in and direct films intermittently till his death), I would like to restrict the use of the term mass film for films made *after* the NTR vehicle—'after' in the chronological sense and also in terms of the borrowings. The mass film's critical difference with the NTR vehicle is that the latter is *centred on an absence*. In a sense, the name of this hole is NTR—he was, after all, not available—but the absence is textually manifest and worked out at the narrative level as well. As we shall see below, at the story level, it is the dead father and/or the absent/disintegrated family who are immediate stand-ins for what is missing in the hero's life. It is possible and even tempting to see the hero as a rebellious figure; however, it is useful to think of the characters played by a younger star as doing everything the old man NTR did on screen, and some *because the patriarch was not around anymore*, neither in the industry nor in the fiction.

The mass film is the cinematic equivalent of the NTR estate. Framed thus, it becomes possible to place in perspective the crucial function that the mass film served in the 1980s, and the frequent speculations on Chiranjeevi's political entry, resulting from the political messages his film roles purportedly sent out. Coincidentally, or perhaps not so surprisingly, two generations of actors, including the stars belonging to both the rival dynasties of Telugu film industry, have staked claims to the inheritance. The centrality of the masses for the mass film, both as addressee and diegetic presence, can also be seen as yet another obviously political sign of continuity.

Both the NTR vehicle and the mass film correspond with a period of rapid growth across all sectors of the Telugu film industry. Indeed, it is possible to suggest that this was the *form* around which the industry grew. Through the two decades from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, the number of productions grew rapidly as did the distribution network. Till the early 1990s, the exhibition sector (consisting of essentially single screen cinema halls or complexes housing more than one hall in larger towns and cities), too, grew impressively.[5]

NTR also made an important but indirect contribution to the mass film as an administrator, after he was elected to power in 1983,

by changing the entertainment tax regime. The new entertainment tax rule introduced in 1983, known in industry circles as the slab system, has been among the most important government interventions in the industry over the past few decades. Ordinance 31 of 1983 (later A.P. Entertainment Tax Act No. 24/84) classified theatres local area-wise (that is, according to whether they were situated in municipal corporations or cities, selection grade municipalities or large towns, etc.) and according to their amenities (that is, whether they were air-conditioned, air-cooled, or 'ordinary').

Across the country, a number of state governments instituted flat rates of taxation around this time and the most obvious reason for doing so was the widespread practice of under-reporting ticket sales by the exhibitor-distributor nexus in order to avoid paying entertainment tax. The practice of under reporting was widely prevalent and newspapers, too, occasionally drew attention to the sale of 'fake tickets' at cinema halls for which the exhibitor, of course, paid no tax (*Eenadu*, Vijayawada Edition, 2 March 1983: 6).

Under the new rules, tax was imposed on total seating capacity instead of on the number of tickets actually sold. An air-conditioned theatre in a city, at the highest tax bracket, was taxed at the rate of 25 per cent of the 'gross collection capacity' multiplied by 22 (per month). Temporary/touring cinemas, at the lowest end, were taxed at the rate of 13 per cent of the gross collection capacity multiplied by 7 in 1991 (*Andhra Pradesh Film Diary 1995*: 30). In the earlier system, tax was levied on the number of tickets actually sold at rates varying between 30 and 18 per cent. The tax rates underwent many modifications over the years and came down to 14 per cent at the highest and 8 per cent at the lowest levels in 1995 (*TV Chitra,* July 1995: 38). According to Gudipoodi Srihari, a three tier structure of taxation, which varied from 26 per cent for big budget films produced outside the state and 8 per cent for small budget films produced locally, was the most suitable for the film industry. The Congress government (1989–94) introduced this modification, and Srihari claims that under this tax structure, aided by subsidies that stood at Rs 3 lakh per film in this period, a number of low budget films were produced (Srihari 1995a: 14). For films which qualified for the lowest rate, the differential tax was actually in the form a tax subsidy to ensure that only films produced in Andhra Pradesh qualified. However, the tax subsidy was withdrawn after the government discovered that some producers were falsely declaring that their films were low budget productions (this in turn was decided on

the basis of number of prints since it was impossible to audit actual production costs), to claim tax concessions. Upon returning to power in 1994, NTR reintroduced the 8 per cent slab (tax subsidy) for low budget films, but not the virtually penal rate of tax for big budget productions made in Madras. Producers, who had not yet shifted to Hyderabad, continuously lobbied with various governments to ensure that the tax and subsidies of the state did not adversely affect them (Srilata 1995: 38). Coincidentally, NTR's son Balakrishna was still based in Madras in 1995, as was Chiranjeevi, when policy changes were announced by NTR.

The slab system was rolled back due to lobbying by sections of the industry in 2005. What is significant for our purposes is that the government was indirectly rewarding full houses because average tax per seat came down as the occupancy rate went up. Low occupancy rates could no longer be sustained beyond a certain point for tax reasons alone. As maintenance costs increased, levels sustainability came down even further. The slab system, introduced to discipline the industry, propped up the mass film, whose wide appeal and star presence was thought to ensure full houses. I return to the consequences of the slab system for the industry in Chapter 5.

The Missing Patriarch: Thematic Concerns of the Mass Film

In the second phase of Chiranjeevi's career, spanning the period between *Khaidi* (1983) and *Hitler* (1997), the mass film emerged as the dominant genre of Telugu cinema. However, it also went through a period of crisis, spawning various experiments to revive its thematic concerns as well as economic logic. It is largely due to the emergence of the mass film that NTR's exit from the industry did not result in any drastic revamp or reorganization of the industry. Instead, new replacements were rapidly found to ensure the sustainability of the NTR model. The most obvious candidate was Chiranjeevi, who had acted in 50 films between 1978, when he entered the industry, and 1983. Although impressive, this number should not lead us to the assumption that he was already a major star in 1983. Chiranjeevi's contemporaries like Rajendra Prasad played the lead in dozens of low budget films in the 1980s and 1990s without breaking into the big league.

I will refer to Chiranjeevi's films before 1983 only in passing, because in these films, plentiful as they are, there was little consistency in his roles. Like most other inexpensive stars of that period, he was cast

in a variety of roles in films that drew on diverse sources and generic tendencies in the industry. These include the class film, and as well as action and suspense thrillers, neither of which was a distinct genre yet. Examples of the former include *Manavuri Pandavulu* (K. Bapu 1978, remake of the Kannada film *Paduvarahalli Pandavaru*, Puttanna Kanagal 1978), *Subhalekha* (K. Vishwanath 1982), and *Manchupallaki* (Vamsi 1982). *Yamakinkarudu* (Raj Bharath 1982, based on *Mad Max*, George Miller 1979) is an experiment in assembling a full-fledged action film. *Abhilasha* (A. Kodandarami Reddy 1983) was a suspense thriller based on a popular novel by Yandamuri Veerendranath.

In 1982, even as NTR was making his bid to capture political power, Chiranjeevi's *Intlo Ramayya Veedhilo Krishnayya* (Kodi Ramakrishna 1982) had a 25 week run (*Andhra Jyothi* 1982: iv). Within months of NTR's election, *Khaidi* (A. Kodandarami Reddy 1983) established Chiranjeevi as the most prominent star of his generation. This film was also a landmark mass film, demonstrating how techniques hitherto identified with established stars like NTR and Krishna could be also used to underscore the extraordinariness of a relatively minor actor—to create a star. I return to these techniques at some length in a different section below, but I will focus on the thematic concerns of the mass films of Chiranjeevi for the present.

Around 1983, an attempt was also made to launch NTR's son, Balakrishna, in the post election film featuring NTR himself, *Simham Navvindi* (Yoganand 1983). Balakrishna had acted intermittently in films, as a child star since the 1970s (for example, *Tatamma Kala*, NTR 1974). In the early 1980s, Balakrishna too began to act in films regularly and also played a role in his father's *Shrimadvirat Veerabrahmendra Swami Charitra* (NTR 1984). *Mangammagari Manavadu* (Kodi Ramakrishna 1984), a ruralist melodrama revolving around an extended rich peasant family and its internal squabbles, is arguably his most important early 1980s film. The close association of Balakrishna with NTR, even on screen, reinforced the prevailing view that Chiranjeevi was a struggling and completely self-made man.[6]

It is incorrect to assume that there is a high degree of consistency in the themes of the mass film. Mass films are not always about poor people or their problems. Nevertheless, it is possible to make a case for a particular consistency in the careers of individual stars and for a recurring feature of the mass film: deep-rooted ambivalence to feudal authority. This ambivalence merits attention because it is crucial for defining the

kind of leader/authority figure that emerges not only from the screen roles of Chiranjeevi but also of the other stars of his generation.

At the very outset, Chiranjeevi's distinction was marked by the distance that he deliberately maintained from the roles played by NTR in the period just before the latter's election. However, a major development in which both NTR and Chiranjeevi were differentially implicated, was Telugu cinema's discovery of the feudal in the 1970s.

Most filmic representations of the countryside in the past, with the exception of a handful of films like *Raitu Bidda* (G. Ramabrahmam 1939), had scrupulously avoided any references to zamindari oppression. Simultaneously, from the commentaries on films produced between the 1930s and 1960s by Kodavatiganti (2000) and Sastry (1986), it is possible to suggest that Telugu cinema also avoided glorification of the feudal order. In films like *Shavukaru* (L.V. Prasad 1950) and *Palletooru* (T. Prakash Rao 1952) we notice that the countryside was peopled with rich and poor peasants, who belonged to the same kinship networks. Cross-cousin marriages were one of the forms of resolving class conflict. The ousting of feudal authorities and oppression from the village, is, of course, loaded with political significance, but is not of immediate relevance to our discussion. Instead, I would like to draw attention to the rather sudden discovery of the feudal authority figure—as a source of oppression as well as role model.

In the NTR films of the 1970s, especially *Raitu Bidda* (B.A. Subba Rao 1971, not to be confused with the 1939 film), we notice the surfacing of the feudal question, both as a problem of inheritance and also as a relationship that has to be replaced with modern forms of leadership and loyalty, respectively. By the late 1970s, there was a full-fledged obsession with the feudal in the Telugu film industry, manifesting in a steady output of films representing not only feudal oppression but also the recovery of other figures embodying inherited wealth or representing traditional authority as objects of nostalgia.

Like a number of struggling actors of the time, Chiranjeevi was closely identified with low-budget films. These included not just the thriller, the romance, and the class film, but also 'semi-realist' and 'semi-art' films,[7] centred on feudal oppression and peasant rebellion. A major source of influence on these films was New Indian Cinema, especially the work of Shyam Benegal, *Ankur* (1973) and *Nishant* (1975) in particular, which alerted the Telugu film industry to the cinematic uses of the feudal landlord. *Pranam Khareedu*, featuring Chiranjeevi as a poor peasant who leads a rebellion against the oppressive zamindar,

is a landmark film not only in his career, but also in the career of anti-feudal films inspired by New Indian Cinema. Within a couple of years this strand would result in a genre locally known as the red film or the communist film.[8]

The political context of Andhra Pradesh was, no doubt, a major reason for this turn towards a Left populism in Telugu cinema. The context was shaped by the public debates on feudalism, which were, in part, sparked off by the Srikakulam uprising (1967) and the Naxalite movement.[9] With the spread of Naxalism in the early 1970s to the plains of the Telangana region, the anti-feudal struggle and demands for land reform became central political questions. Sumanta Banerjee's observation underscores the importance of the feudal question for the movement:

> The main achievement of the Naxalbari movement was the ignition of a fire among the rural poor that has refused to die down till today. It continues to arouse them to protest and take up arms against their feudal oppressors, and even take on the Indian state whenever it sends its police to protect these feudal interests, whether in the villages of Bihar, or the tribal hamlets of Andhra Pradesh (2002: 2116).

The Congress government in the state not only responded with severe repression on the movement but also made a reluctant attempt at land reforms.[10] The Naxalite groups and their front organizations exposed the linkages between the landed elite (which held land *illegally,* for there was officially a ceiling on land ownership) and agencies of the state. Furthermore, the conditions of the rural poor as well as the severity of state repression were brought to light by the Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC) in its reports that were often highlighted in the mainstream press.[11] Moreover, due to the literary and cultural activities of organizations affiliated or sympathetic to Naxalite parties,[12] a popular critique of feudalism became available, which spread far beyond the areas where the Naxalites were actually mobilizing the poor.

Meanwhile, in NTR's films, the village landlord, who was also the maternal uncle of the hero, became the chief villain in *Yama Gola*. The hero is seen mobilizing the village youth against the landlord and his men, in the early part of the film. Starting with *Sardar Paparayudu* (Dasari Narayana Rao 1980) and coinciding with the most successful phase of NTR's acting career, a series of films were made thematizing the passing of an older (and glorious) order. The question these films'

narrative raises is *what comes after the feudal*, which is now on the verge of extinction? The solution is presented in the form of the younger NTR, who is, in every sense, the true heir of the heroic patriarch or a replacement of an *inauthentic* patriarch.[13]

In all these films, the social is imaged as being centred on a lack or absence. The old order, these films suggest, has indeed disintegrated and the problem with the present is to find a replacement for the missing centre of authority. In the films themselves, this was going to be the NTR characters. The battle, if there was one, was not between ideological camps in the industry. Both approaches to the feudal question had a great deal in common and it was easy for stars as well as producers and technicians to move across the apparent political divide. Furthermore, NTR was not alone in the enterprise of presenting the feudal as an object of nostalgia. The younger Krishnam Raju played the lead role in *Bobbili Brahmanna* (K. Raghavendra Rao 1984) as the village chieftain who solves its disputes without the intervention of the modern state. The film was remade into Hindi as *Dharam Adhikari* (K. Raghavendra Rao 1986), with Dilip Kumar in the lead role. Krishnam Raju, known as the 'Rebel Star' could thus play a feudal patriarch with as much ease as a vigilante.

The political problem, as the Telugu cinema of the period would have it, is not one of good or bad feudal authorities, but the fact that neither was available for social organization. The hero had to, thus, either hasten the process of rendering the malevolent authority figure extinct (*Khaidi*, for example), or give the benevolent one a new lease of life (NTR's films). In either case, the question was one of filling the hole. The mass film thus swung between the arguably anti-feudal *Khaidi* to an undeniably anachronistic and revivalist one like *Pedarayudu* (Ravi Raja Pinisetty 1995).[14] These swings are quite consistent with its populism, which is not easily identified as left or rightwing. In the following pages, I will fill in the details of Chiranjeevi's career to illustrate the genre's handling of what was clearly an important political question, one thrown up by the Naxalite movement.

An additional feature that the mass film inherited from the work of NTR and Krishna, is the importance of the crowd in the diegesis. It is common for the mass film's action to be set in the midst of crowds (not just extras but also at times crowds of bystanders watching the shooting and staring or waving at the camera). The mass film is quite literally the film where the masses make a frequent appearance. The crowd, however, is not the only manifestation of the masses. In the

mass film, the star is the representative of the lower classes, one among the masses, as can be seen in *Khaidi, Gharana Mogudu, Mutha Mestri, Lorry Driver* (B. Gopal 1990, featuring Balakrishna), and *Gharana Bullodu* (K. Raghavendra Rao 1995, featuring Nagarjuna). While such roles, too, are a continuation of the careers of NTR and MGR in the films of the earlier generation of stars, the distinction of the protagonist had to be accounted for in terms of the plot, by presenting him as a member of a feudal family who will eventually reclaim his inheritance (or give it away). In the mass film on the other hand, there is often no attempt to present the hero as the lost son of the zamindar, who grows up as a commoner. The mass film's hero is a commoner, period. Typical of the genre's ambivalence, however, it is not difficult to find examples of the hero being the dispossessed son of a feudal lord.

Making of the Mass Film

In Chiranjeevi's *Khaidi*, however, it is the difference from NTR that comes across most sharply. Unlike NTR's later films, *Khaidi* does not attempt to resolve the crisis in feudalism by finding an heir for the feudal authority. Instead, the state's authority is depicted as being undermined by its linkages with a decadent feudal order. The hero in *Khaidi* severs the link between the landlord and the state by killing the landlord, in the process *legitimating* the state's authority. The state is thus freed from feudalism, so that it can get on with the business of governance. Suryam, the Chiranjeevi character in *Khaidi,* is a transitional authority figure, literally an embodiment of the anti-feudal struggle abandoned by the state, who surrenders (to the police) his agency after killing the landlord. In later mass films, the star-protagonist not only re-establishes the legitimacy of the state, but also becomes an alternative to the absent feudal authority.

Khaidi drew on previous Chiranjeevi starrers to reinforce some of their thematic concerns and their construction of the heroic rebel. R. Nandakumar points out: 'On the part of the spectator, it is not the individual roles in which the star is cast so much as one cumulative image that emerges from the totality of his various performances that comes in handy to be accepted' (1992: 44). The 'cumulative image' of Chiranjeevi that emerged in *Khaidi*, was a result of a selection (from his earlier films), or rather, a narrativization of his previous roles and 'life' to construct an authentic rebel-hero. I would like to add that, as early as 1979, details of Chiranjeevi's humble origin were well-known biographical 'facts'.[15]

In hindsight, *Pranam Khareedu*, Chiranjeevi's first film, proved to be very useful in this regard. The film was set in pre-independence India and was indebted to the politico-aesthetic space created by New Indian Cinema of the 1970s.[16] This film was shot in black and white, which at that time was limited to the cheapest films produced by the industry, and almost entirely on location at a village in West Godavari district. It depicts the atrocities of a landlord (Rao Gopal Rao) who kills Bhimudu (Chandramohan), the deaf-mute protagonist of the film, and his own wife (Jayasudha), suspecting an affair between the two of them. Chiranjeevi's role as Narsi, the rebellious former servant of the landlord, is small but significant. He returns from the city, where he migrates to in the early part of the film, and finds that the girl he wanted to marry (Reshmi) has been raped by the landlord's men. Later, he leads the villagers in rebellion and kills his former master to avenge the deaths of Bhimudu and the landlord's benevolent wife, who is herself from a poor family.

In *Chattaniki Kallu Levu* (1981), Chiranjeevi plays the role of Vijay, a vigilante who tracks down his father's murderers and kills them. His sister Durga (Lakshmi), a police officer, attempts to capture their father's killers, who hitherto had escaped punishment by producing fake alibis, and have them punished legally. Although she has the case reopened, she fails to gather evidence against them and fails to prevent Vijay from killing them. Furthermore, Vijay gets away with the triple murder as there is no proof of his involvement. He therefore proves that the law is blind (which is how the title translates into English), but, in doing so, ensures that society is rid of its most dreaded and powerful criminals.

In *Intlo Ramayya Veedhilo Krishnayya*, the hero, a government servant posted in a village, marries the haughty, college-educated daughter of a rich farmer. The narrative revolves around misunderstandings between the lead pair (Chiranjeevi and Madhavi), caused by the heroine's refusal to trust her husband. She is easily misled by the villain, a scheming neighbour (Gollapudi Maruthi Rao). The couple is reunited after the hero foils the villain's plan to rape the heroine. Interestingly, the hero's parents neither appear in the film, nor are they even mentioned. Like *Chattaniki Kallu Levu, Intlo Ramayya Veedhilo Krishnayya* has a hero who does not claim legitimacy by virtue of belonging to a feudal family. Instead, in both films the heroes are seen as inheriting nothing from earlier generations.

Discussing Amitabh Bachchan's films, Prasad remarks, '[T]he orphan is a figure of marginality, deprived of normal familial pleasures by the

intrusion of evil' (1998: 143). In the mass film, too, orphanhood is a common trope for representing marginality. The dead father/parents are also invoked to underscore the hero's distance from feudal authority.

Khaidi draws on the construction of the hero in *Chattaniki Kallu Levu* and *Intlo Ramayya Veedhilo Krishnayya*, where the heroes, being cut off from the feudal patriarch, do not inherit his authority, but become alternative sources of authority instead. The machismo of this new hero does not merely supplement his authority, but is, in fact, its chief source.

Before going any further, a disclaimer would be in order. It is not as if orphanhood is the essential or the only mode of constructing the kind of heroic figure that Chiranjeevi played on screen. In *Kodama Simham*, the hero has two sets of parents, the first being foster parents, with whom he has an interestingly playful relationship. It is then revealed that he is the descendent of a distinguished family that has been destroyed by the villains.

Returning to the early 1980s, *Khaidi's* departure from the two films of the period discussed above, lies in building on the marginality of the orphan/fatherless hero and producing him as a lower *caste* figure, in the sense that lower caste origins can be attributed to the hero by the audience, despite the absence of any mention of his caste status in the film itself. Post-independence popular Telugu cinema rarely contains explicit references to caste, although a number of caste-signifiers are deployed to suggest the caste of a character. In the careers of both Chiranjeevi and Rajnikant, who are strikingly dark complexioned in comparison to NTR and MGR, whom they succeeded, the surfacing of a certain kind of 'realism' ensured that the characters played by these stars could be read as standing in not only for a lower class hero, but a lower caste one as well. In *Khaidi*, a standard caste-marker—complexion—underscores the hero's subalternity. Around this time, filmmakers began to avoid coating the hero's face with pancake makeup, as was indiscriminately applied to all stars in the past, regardless of minor variations of skin complexion. For instance, the relatively fair skinned NTR and the darker ANR were both painted white even after they began acting in colour films. Fair complexion, enhanced by make-up, has been *the* signifier of the hero's upper caste status in popular cinema—there was no need for an explicit mention of his caste.

In *Khaidi*, the medium complexioned star not only remained so on screen, but in the opening sequence, the make-up enhanced the darkness

of his skin. Furthermore, in the absence of other signifiers marking him as upper caste, *Khaidi*'s lower class hero was also easily misrecognized as *lower caste*. It thus became possible for Chiranjeevi and some of the other stars of his generation to signify the lower caste status of their characters and enhance the *authenticity* of the subaltern figures they played. Our hero's subalternity was, no doubt, further authenticated by the stories of his humble origin, which often also included a caste angle: he was a Kapu in a Kamma dominated industry. Over the years he would become the very first non-Kamma to be counted among the biggest stars of the industry since the 1950s.

Another disclaimer: the absent/dead father does not always hint at the hero's lower caste origins in the films of Chiranjeevi. In some films like *Challenge* (1984) and *Gangleader,* despite his fatherlessness, the hero cannot be seen as a lower caste figure. Later, I shall briefly examine these films to illustrate how caste, fatherlessness, and the feudal are linked and also de-linked in the mass film.

Challenge, like *Abhilasha*, is based on a popular novel by the acclaimed 1980s novelist Yandamuri Veerendranath, who went on to direct Chiranjeevi in a film based on one of his novels (*Stuartpuram Police Station*). The Yandamuri connection was one of the means by which Chiranjeevi came to signify a generational shift in the industry.[17] More obvious markers of distinction were his dancing and fighting skills. The latter were further underscored by claims that he preferred to do his own stunts, especially in films inspired by action films made in different parts of the world. Notable among these are: *Yamakinkarudu* (*Mad Max*, George Miller 1979), *Hero* (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Steven Spielberg 1981), *Sivudu, Sivudu, Sivudu* (modelled on the Hong Kong martial arts film), and *Pasivadi Pranam* (*Witness*, Peter Weir 1985). Not to mention *Khaidi*, itself, which as we shall see, draws heavily on *First Blood* (Ted Kotcheff 1982).

Challenge begins with Gandhi (Chiranjeevi) losing his mother due to his failure to bring her medicines on time. The opening sequence is a powerful indictment of the exploitative nature of the existing system: from the autorickshaw driver and pharmacist to the ward boy in the government hospital morgue, everyone demands additional payment (in the last case, a bribe) and tries to cash in on the emergency situation. After the death of his mother (his father is presumed to have died before the film begins), the poor, educated but unemployed Gandhi makes a bet with the millionaire Ram Mohan Rao (Rao Gopal Rao)

that he will earn Rs 50 lakh in five years. Rao, offended by the youth's arrogance, offers his daughter Harika (Vijayashanti) in marriage if he wins. Gandhi, with the help of Lakshmi (Suhasini), a poor university gold medallist whom he saves from drowning, initially sells ideas and helps clients establish businesses. He later starts an industry with the help of unemployed educated youth turned Naxalites, after reforming them. He then enters into a partnership with an unemployed engineer Vidyarthi (Rajendra Prasad) and starts a paper factory with a loan from his enemy, Ram Mohan Rao, outwitting his efforts to destroy his business ventures. With some help from Harika, who falls in love with him, he manages to earn the Rs 50 lakh. However, there is a misunderstanding between him and Lakshmi when the latter supports the workers in the course of a strike instigated by Ram Mohan Rao's men. In an attempt to avoid conceding defeat, Ram Mohan Rao attempts to flee the country. Gandhi catches up with him after a chase, but refuses to take his 'prize' (Harika) saying he only wanted to show that money was less important than human relations. Meanwhile, currency notes totalling 50 lakh spill all over a hillside and are picked up by the poor. Having proved that 'any intelligent person can earn money', Gandhi returns to Lakshmi and marries her.

In this film, education is deployed as a marker of upper caste status. Educated unemployed youth (gold medallists included in that category), who appear at regular intervals throughout the film are shown as standing examples of the failure of the welfare state. Gandhi and Lakshmi reject the state as an agency of employment/welfare and turn to capitalism. Interestingly, however, Gandhi's entry into the capitalist world is *preceded* by his condemnation of it as inhuman (which is why the bet is made in the first place). The temporary separation between Gandhi and Lakshmi is caused by the latter's apprehension that Gandhi has turned into an inhuman capitalist instead of exposing the system's shortcomings. Throughout the film, even as the narrative races ahead, there is a deep sense of loss: a suggestion that something is missing in the world of big money, which the challengers now enter. Gandhi and Lakshmi, at different points, name this absence as 'human relationships'. I would suggest that it is a sense of the social, an absence that is indexed in the film by the absence of the family—there is not a complete family, not even a nuclear family, in the film. Harika for instance, is motherless while Gandhi, Lakshmi, and Vidyarthi are orphans. The film, thus, nostalgically looks forward to the formation of the family with the marriage of Lakshmi and Gandhi. While the

feudal extended family is totally absent in the film, this absence acquires the status of an omniscient being as the hollowness of the capitalist system is repeatedly exposed. Although the narrative does not stage a return of the feudal, the fractured family—the sign of the lack of 'human relationships' in the film—becomes an indication of what is lost with the passing of an older order, whose sole vestige in the present is the arrogant Ram Mohan Rao. Moreover, state socialism/welfarism and capitalism are rejected as poor replacements for what is lost. In *Challenge,* the couple (Gandhi and Lakshmi) is burdened with the responsibility of the community's reorganization as various orphans are drawn towards the hero and heroine. *Challenge* doesn't quite fit the description of the mass film in terms of its techniques or the representation of the star-protagonist and the relationship it establishes between him and spectator. In thematic terms, however, there is a close fit between this film and the genre, which was not yet fully in place around this time.

Rather than tracking Chiranjeevi's career chronologically, for the moment I will stay with the question of the feudal, focusing primarily on films that revolve around it. I will have the occasion to return to some landmark 1980s films later in the chapter. In *Gangleader* (1991) and most other later Chiranjeevi mass films, the extended family's reorganization around the star-hero is seen as a replacement of the feudal society's organization around the patriarch. Raja Ram (Chiranjeevi), in *Gangleader*, is an educated unemployed youth who goes to jail for owning responsibility for an accident caused by some one else. He does this to raise money for his elder brother Raghava's (Sarat Kumar) education. He belongs to an extended lower middle-class family run by his eldest brother, Raghupati (Murali Mohan). His widowed paternal grandmother (Nirmala) becomes the titular head of the family in the absence of the parents, but it is really Raghupati's efforts that help the family survive. In many ways, this is a typical mass film family scene: a transitional figure of authority is on the verge of displacement. Soon, the villains kill Raghupati and Raghava marries a corrupt police official's daughter (Sumalata) and turns the rest of his family away, leaving the most irresponsible of the brothers, Raja Ram, in charge.

Before the bad times begin, there are some sequences that underscore the film's handling of the larger problem of the missing patriarch. A large framed photograph of Raja Ram's grandfather, bearing a striking resemblance to Raja Ram but in expensive clothing and turban, is worshipped by the grandmother. It is, of course, a photograph of

Chiranjeevi himself in the early twentieth century provincial big man getup. Quite obviously meant to indicate the family's feudal origins (and thereby the hero's upper caste status), the photograph is used, interestingly, for comic effect. On one occasion, Raja Ram dresses like his grandfather, removes the photograph from its frame and stands behind it to play a trick on his grandmother. Having become his grandfather, he makes the old woman promise that she would not harass Raja Ram because the youth is his (grandfather's) incarnation. Harassment here is understood to mean waking Raja Ram early in the morning and scolding him for returning home after midnight. On another occasion, the 'grandfather' makes passes at Kanya Kumari (Vijayashanti). At one level, however, the comic deployment of the dead ancestor also points at the uselessness of the feudal past. Raja Ram, after all, goes on to become a taxi driver and falls in love with the disowned daughter of the villain, Kanya Kumari, who is depicted as a female 'rowdy' in the early part of the film. However, these comic sequences also anticipate the evolution of Raja Ram into the *patriarch*, around whom the fractured extended family organizes itself. The threatened and incomplete extended family (Raghupati is killed by the villain while Raghava is misled by his upper class wife into disowning the rest of the family), itself, becomes a marker of the crisis in the film. The disintegration of the family, the film suggests, is at once a sign and an effect of the passing of the feudal. While there is no going back to the feudal, the absence of the feudal, itself, gestures towards that (imaginary) point of time when the social (the family/community) had not been fissured. The feudal, thus, invokes nostalgia in the film because it is irretrievably lost and has not yet been replaced by a credible alternative. At the level of story, the disintegration of the family and the gang of friends (which the film's title refers to), and the death of members of both the family and the gang, is a direct consequence of the malevolence of men in authority, who are presided over by a corrupt politician with whom Raghava's father-in-law is in league.

In the mass film, therefore, the 'crisis in feudalism' is imaged either as the *absence of the benevolent feudal patriarch* or as the *presence of the oppressive authority figure*, or, as a combination of both. Malevolent authority figures have to be destroyed because they do not represent *the* feudal (as it should be) but its distortion.[18]

What then is the problem that the genre attempts to resolve? The mass film represents the social as being centred on an absence (as seen above), an absence which is at once the sign of and cause for

the disintegration of the social (evident by the threat to the already fractured extended family/community). The state's delegitimization, coupled with the calling for urgent remedial measures, is tied up with the 'original' absence of the benevolent feudal which is seen as creating the conditions for its takeover by the gangster capitalist (*Gangleader, Gharana Mogudu*), malevolent landlord (*Khaidi, Khaidi No. 786*) or a combination of the gangster, politician, and capitalist (in most mass films including *Mutha Mestri* and even *Gangleader* we see an alliance of forces of evil including the gangster, politician, and corrupt government servant). This situation is also depicted as facilitating the emergence of the oppressive matriarch or vulgar (read independent) woman (*Attaku Yamudu Ammayiki Mogudu* and *Gharana Mogudu* respectively), whose assertiveness or emergence into the public domain threatens the family (discussed in Chapter 4). The problem, then, is the degeneration of the public and private realms by the appropriation of authority or wealth by illegitimate claimants.

The rebel-hero, often represented as a criminal or a fugitive, is depicted not only as a manifestation of the crisis in authority (in that he is a product of the criminalization of the public domain and all-round degeneration) but also the agent of reform, precisely because he is also a major part of the problem of representing the subaltern *who is not in his place*.

The mass film, thus, interprets the social and political ferment of its time as a crisis in authority, be it that of the feudal order or the state itself. The figure of the rebel/rowdy is crucial to the resolution of the crisis. His war against evil feudal lords, corrupt police/government officials, and/or gangster-capitalist-politicians is a means of establishing order where there is only chaos. I will return to the political responsibility of the mass hero in the later chapters in some detail.

The genre's elaboration of politics is closely linked to how the star is presented in it. The discussion of thematic concerns throws light on the story level location of the star, but does not do justice to the fact that a film is, after all, a film and the stars work quite differently from characters in literature. Films produce spectators, even if these entities might be identified by concerned observers as voters or perverts, as the case might be. In my discussion of the political work of stars or even the cinema itself, a crucial focal point is the spectator produced by the film/genre in question. I will now turn my attention to the ways in which the star is deployed in the mass film to produce a certain kind of spectator. An argument about the mass film's politics cannot afford to

remain innocent of how the genre works to seduce and incite historically located viewers into willing spectators.

Mass Film's Star and Spectator

The mass film, in the early 1980s, used relatively minor stars and it was only in the late 1980s that the big star, big budget, and the mass film became a part of a single package. When it was finally assembled, the package was a pointer to the self-fulfilling prophecy that the mass film always was—in the absence of NTR, it created a generation of stars, presenting its male lead actors as if they were already stars, who were widely recognized by the viewers. With the simultaneous rise of Chiranjeevi and Balakrishna in the 1980s, the NTR model of stardom, which was an aesthetic one as much as it was an economic one, was developed further.

Even as I focus primarily on Chiranjeevi in this book, I would like to note that, in spite of the apparent differences between their individual styles, the themes of their films, and the violent conflicts between their fans, much was common between Chiranjeevi and Balakrishna. Both stars made similar contributions to the establishment of the mass film, which, among other things, was premised on the existence of whistling fans before the screen. Both worked with all the major directors associated with the mass film (Kodandarami Reddy, Kodi Ramakrishna, and B. Gopal, for example), even as these directors, too, grew in stature. Around these stars, the mass film, itself, emerged as a superstructural entity that was capable of facilitating innumerable experiments with not only other local but also Hollywood genres. The genres towards which the mass film gestured, include the action-adventure film, the western (*Kondaveeti Raja*, *Kodama Simham*), science fiction (Balakrishna's *Aditya 386*, Singeetham Srinivas Rao 1991, based on *Back to the Future*, Robert Zemeckis 1985), folklore film (*Raja Vikramarka, Bhairava Dweepam* featuring Chiranjeevi and Balakrishna, and based on *Coming to America*, John Landis 1988 and *Patala Bhairavi*, K.V. Reddy 1951, respectively), and the 'socio-fantasy' (industry term for the fusion of elements from the folklore or mythological film into a story in a contemporary setting, for example, *Jagadeka Veerudu Atiloka Sundari*).

Notwithstanding the borrowed plots and generic elements, the mass film (a) retained the formulaic elements and overarching melodramatic structure of popular Indian cinema, often revolving around the familiar narratives of revenge, familial crises, etc. and (b) unlike familiar local genres available thus far, it *consistently underscored the presence of*

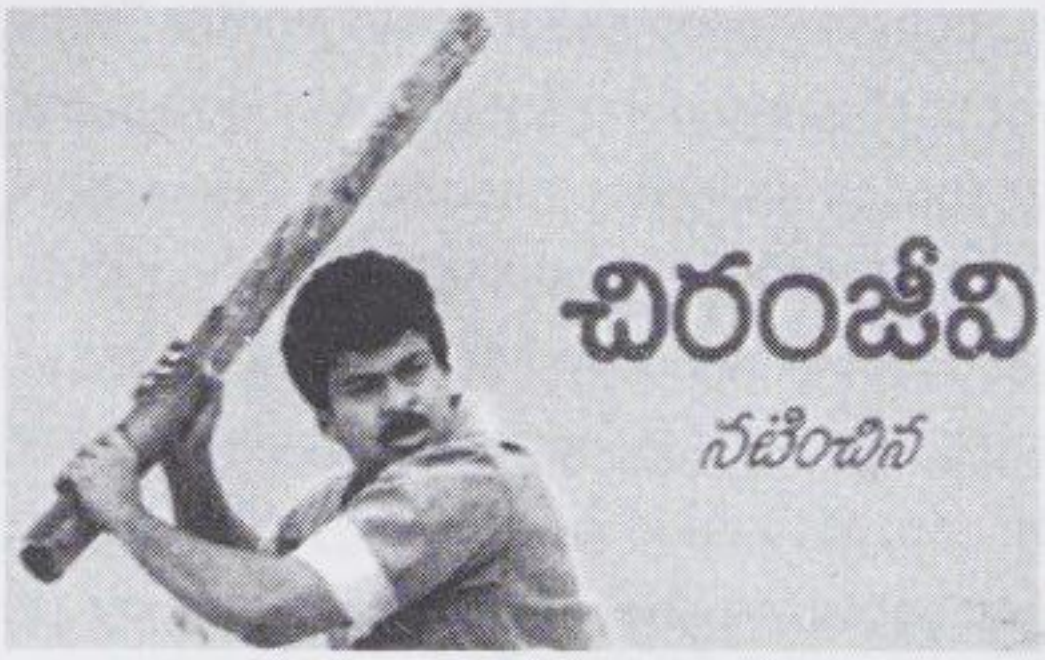
the star within the diegesis by the use of a number of techniques. I discuss, below, these techniques, which are at once the chief distinguishing feature of the mass film as much as markers of a historical phase in the life of popular cinema in the southern region. This phase witnessed the emergence of new stars in industries that were dominated and, indeed, formed around major stars of an earlier generation. While suggesting that there is a larger argument on the region's cinema waiting to be made, I will however restrict myself to the mass film itself and leave it to other researchers with the required competencies to make it.

The stars of the mass film do not make a quiet entry into the narrative. What allows us to conceive of the mass film, as a genre, is not merely the shared thematic or formal features of the films classified thus, but the manner in which the star (most often the male star) is deployed to produce a set of expectations, and, more importantly, *a particular kind of spectator*. I will mention in passing that, once the broader structure was in place, it became possible for female stars, especially the 'Lady Superstar' Vijayashanti, too, to be presented in a manner that was strikingly similar to that of their male counterparts.[19] The spectator position, constructed by the mass film, hinges on how the star is represented and what he does for the narrative.

The mass film, to begin with the beginning, has elaborate opening sequences. However, even before we arrive at the story proper, the credit sequence flags the presence of the star, whose name is accompanied by his honorific title ('Megastar Chiranjeevi in …'). It is not unusual for the credits to have freeze frames of the star or have the star looking directly into the camera and waving, winking, or smiling. So the entry of the character, played by the star into the narrative, is preceded by the announcement of the presence of the star in the film, no doubt as its chief attraction. The extent to which the mass film can go to making a spectacle of the credits, can be seen in most vehicles of major stars produced in the past decade. By far the most striking embellishment of the credit sequence, in order to underscore the stature of the star, is to be seen in *Rayalaseema Ramanna Chaudhury* (Suresh Krissna 2000). The film happens to be the 500th film of its star Mohan Babu, who like Chiranjeevi began his career in supporting/'negative' roles in low budget films. He was also a TDP Rajya Sabha MP for a term. Here, the opening credits become the occasion for the telling of the story of the star's rise. The sequence strings together clips from Mohan Babu's landmark films. When the count reaches 500, or arrives at this film, the

title appears along with two images of the star, in one of which he in the getup of Rayalaseema Ramanna Chaudhury, the character he plays in this film. Having thus underscored the importance of the star that plays the character, the sequence then presents another dimension of the star. We see a farmer ploughing land. The camera zooms in on the plough and a clod of mud is transformed into a flash of light, which then morphs into the star. Even as the shapeless mass grows more recognizable, the field now becomes the globe. The star, when he is finally recognizable, is towering over the globe itself. He is literally the son of the soil (presumably of the Rayalaseema region, where the film is set, but also a region to which the star has often traced his origins), who has achieved global recognition. The figure who overshadows the globe is named as *Nataprapoorna* (one who has achieved mastery in acting) and Collection King (reference to high box-office collections of his films), his two honorific titles as he faces the camera and showers petals towards it. The petals then return from below the camera in the form of hearts representing the love of the viewers for him. The hearts form the words 'Dr. Mohan Babu'. Then the rest of the credits appear against the backdrop of stock scenes of rural life.

Moving on to the introduction of the star-protagonist into the narrative, here, too, elaborate introductions of the star have been a feature of the vehicles of most Telugu and Tamil stars since the 1980s. As such, the practice can be traced back to the films of NTR and MGR from the late 1960s. However, *Khaidi* set a new trend of making the entry of the star-protagonist a distinct filmic component, which like the song, comedy track, or the fight sequence, is relatively autonomous from the rest of the film.[20] As the years went by, each arrival of the star-protagonist at the scene of action, in the course of a single film, began to be accompanied by a signature tune. Further, heroines, comedians,



Figs 29, 30: Credits of *Gharana Mogudu* with still images of Chiranjeevi from the film.

and villains, too, began to have their own special introductions, as the mass film's logic extended beyond the individual male protagonist to a whole package of stars offered in a single film, before and behind the camera.

Khaidi is an important film not only in Chiranjeevi's career, but also in the history of the mass film. In *Khaidi,* Chiranjeevi is cast as Suryam, the city educated son of a poor peasant who falls in love with the local landlord, Veerabhadraiah's (Rao Gopal Rao) daughter—his classmate in college. Trouble begins when the landlord comes to know about the love affair. Failing to coerce the hero's father into breaking the affair, the landlord kills the old man. His crony, the village munsif, kills Suryam's sister and Suryam is accused of the crime. Suryam is tortured by Veerabhadraiah for his 'crime' but escapes before the police arrive to arrest him. Most of the film revolves around Suryam's attempt to escape from the police and avenge the murders of his father, sister, and, later, Doctor Sujata (Sumalata) who shelters and helps him. After a series of arrests and escapes, he kills the villains and surrenders to the police.

Making some obvious references to *First Blood*, from which it draws heavily for its entire opening sequence and some other scenes as well, *Khaidi* has the vigilante seeking revenge upon an oppressive feudal landlord who is in alliance with government officials as well as urban criminals. This film makes overt gestures to the 1970s anti-feudal films, in which Chiranjeevi began his career. The film begins in *medias res*, very much like *First Blood* with the hero roaming the countryside, but unlike the Hollywood film, he is doing so with murderous intent. He is arrested by a police inspector (Ranganath) who suspects him to be the man attempting to murder a local landlord (Rao Gopal Rao). As in *First Blood,* the Chiranjeevi character does not reply to the questions of the police and refuses to let them fingerprint him. In a fascinating divergence from one of the details of the police station incident in the original, the sequence in *Khaidi* deploys a technique that was familiar enough in popular cinema by this time, but was to acquire critical importance in the mass film. I will call this technique the *biographical reference*.

During the course of the interrogation in *Khaidi*, a policeman reaches for an amulet hanging from Suryam's neck. Suryam holds the hand of the policeman, drawing a sharp rebuke from the officer conducting the interrogation. Suryam lets go of the constable's hand and the latter snatches the amulet and hands it over to the officer. The officer looks

at it and notes, 'So you are a devotee of Anjaneya *swamy*'. Eliciting no response, he proceeds with the interrogation as if disappointed that the amulet has failed to give him a vital clue. In the Hollywood film, the police learn the name of the character at this point. The innocuous comment by the police officer draws attention to the widely known biographical detail of Chiranjeevi's devotion to Lord Anjaneya. One of the very first personal details that became available about Chiranjeevi, in the late 1970s, when the film press noticed him, was his devotion to Anjaneya, which the star claimed even determined the choice of his screen name. The point, of course, is not what proportion of the audience could have known this detail about the star. Even as the film remains faithful to the original, in the process of revealing a detail about the character, it constructs a spectator who is presumed to be aware of the distinction of the character: he is in fact a star. In this film and the others that followed, the biographical reference is a gesture beyond the fictional universe. I will address the why question presently, after the elaboration of the forms the reference takes.

In a typical mass film, there are frequent references to the star's name/surname, honorific titles such as Megastar (Chiranjeevi), Yuvasamrat (Nagarjuna), Yuvaratna (Balakrishna), etc. Diminutives of the star's name, such as Chiru and Balayya too are heard in the course of the film, especially during song sequences. In a song in *S.P. Parasuram*, the character he plays is referred to as 'Chiru' by the heroine. *Kodama Simham* has a song in which the refrain is 'Star, Star, Megastar'. In *Alluda Majaka*, Toyota (Chiranjeevi) is introduced by his sidekick Mandela (A.V.S. Subramaniam), as 'Megastar' Toyota. In any number of his films including *Khaidi* and *Jagadeka Veerudu Atiloka Sundari*, the characters he plays are devotees of Anjaneya, the star's favourite god. In *Gangleader* and *Mutha Mestri*, the chief protagonists have the surname Konidela, the same as the star's. But this is not all. In *Mutha Mestri*, Chiranjeevi emerges from a hoarding of one of his own earlier films to dance briefly with the 'vamp' ('Silk' Smita), who is dancing with the Chiranjeevi character of this film (to the song *Ee petaku nene mestri*). In *Hero*, the film's heroine (Radhika) and her mother (Nirmala) travel in a rickshaw decorated with Chiranjeevi film posters. In one sequence, there is a poster of an older Chiranjeevi film in which both the hero and heroine of this film feature. *Big Boss* has a song, shot partly in the midst of a gathering of his fans, which features Chiranjeevi playing himself. Indeed, this film features the comedian Ali as a Chiranjeevi fan who 'mistakes' the protagonist for the star!

Khaidi and the mass films that followed in its wake introduced the star as someone who is offered as the object of spectatorial investment, an agent for the future fulfilment of expectations and provider of pleasure. In *Khaidi* the biographical reference is a cue for the dramatic events that will follow. In the mass films that came later, such direct links between the naming the star and important turns in the narrative, are not made. Returning to *Khaidi*, soon after the comment about the hero being an Anjaneya devotee, he is taken to the lock-up where the barber's approach triggers off the events that set the story rolling. Seeing the barber, Suryam tries to make a dash for the door only to be stopped by a police officer who yanks him by the neck. There is now a cut to Suryam tied to a cart and lifted violently from the ground. We realize this is a flashback fragment when we are returned to the police station. In the next few seconds, shots of the action in the police station, which now centre on the approach of the barber wielding a razor to shave Suryam, are parallel edited with shots of Veerabhadraiah (we do not know his name yet) approaching the hero tied to a cart and slashing his chest with a razor. This scene belongs to a longer flashback that unfolds later in the film. But there is a fair degree of obviousness about the fragment, for there is an immediate spectatorial recognition of the famous screen villain, Rao Gopal Rao, who plays the landlord. The striking similarity between the ill treatment of the hero in the police station and in the village, points to the similarity between the police and the landlord. When the full flashback unfolds, it turns out that the police are actually in active collaboration with the landlord. The hero screams when Veerabhadraiah's razor slashes him—the barber is yet to touch him—and attacks the police officer holding him by the neck. A thrilling fight, no doubt much anticipated, follows immediately. Notably, the build up to the fight is remarkably slow and deliberate. At different points of time during the investigation, Suryam reacts as if he will fight the police, but the inevitable fight is deferred till the flashback fragment is shown.

In this film, with the insertion of the biographical reference, the fulfilment of spectatorial expectation becomes critically hinged on the hero, whose distinction has been underscored by a reference to his star status. The deferred fulfilment ensures that the narrative unfolds according to spectatorial expectation, indeed, as if structured by it. When the narrative logic is in place, the story can begin. The narrative logic, the mass film repeatedly demonstrates, requires the construction of a spectator who *wills* things to happen and trusts the star to make

them happen. In *Khaidi*, this point is reached with the fight sequence. And at this point in the film, the opening credits roll out. *Viewers* still do not know the name of the character played by the star. The spectator—the entity that knows how to read and what to make of the film—is in place. It is this entity that the opening sequence invites the real viewer to become for the duration of the film.

Over the years the sequences establishing the star-protagonist's presence in the film became regular items, elaborate and autonomous from the rest of the film (like the credit sequence itself of *Rayalaseema Ramanna Chaudhury*). These do not necessarily occur in the very beginning of the film and although they have little to do with the story, they offer a variety of thrills. Chiranjeevi's *Ghanara Mogudu*, for example, introduces the hero about six minutes into the film, in a segment that includes a fight and the most popular song in the film, *Bangaru kodipetta*. This sequence is independent from the rest of the film and none of the characters in this segment, other than the hero, reappear later. In this film, the hero *enters the story space*, which is established early in the film as being dominated by the industrialist-heroine, only in the next sequence, when he meets his ailing mother who is in another city where the rest of the film is set.

Even when there was a direct relationship with the story, the opening/introductory sequences incorporate an elaborately staged *play with star recognition.* In *State Rowdy* (B. Gopal 1989), a group of thugs on the lookout for Kali (Chiranjeevi), attack a slum demanding that they be provided with information about his whereabouts. As the thugs go about their business of terrorizing the slum-dwellers, the star is introduced—literally in parts—from his booted feet upwards. The shots of the star's body are interspersed with the chaos caused by the thugs and the culmination of this waiting game is reached with a hand reaching out just in time to prevent the film's heroine from falling on a trident at a roadside shrine. 'Who are you?' demands the leader of the thugs. 'Kalicharan' echoes on the soundtrack as the hand picks up vermilion from the shrine and applies it on the forehead. Only now do we see the face: it is, of course, Chiranjeevi's. In *Alluda Majaka*, too, Chiranjeevi is presented in a series of tilt up shots in close-up, starting with his feet. These shots are interspersed with shots of crowds of eager diegetic viewers jostling to look at him.

The biographical reference to the star's extra-textual existence, is not unique to either to the mass film or to Telugu cinema. The biographical reference is a technique with considerable history in Telugu cinema.

It is traceable to *Patala Bhairavi* (K.V. Reddy 1951) and includes a variety of ways in which the star's extra-diegetic existence as a 'real person' is gestured towards, in the course of the film. In *Patala Bhairavi*, the protagonist's name (Thota Ramudu/Ramudu, played by NTR) is a diminutive of Rama Rao. References to other films by the same star, too, are common in Telugu films before the 1980s. In *Iddaru Mitrulu* (Adurthi Subba Rao 1961), featuring Akkineni Nageswara Rao, there is a mention of *Keelugurram* (Raja of Mirzapur 1949), which was an early hit of the star. In this film, the 'keelugurram' or mechanical horse in question, is a car that the Nageswara Rao character, a mechanic, is attempting to repair. Paidipaala draws our attention to a remarkable song in the NTR starrer *Manushulanta Okkate* (Dasari Narayana Rao 1976), whose words consist entirely of the titles of previous NTR starrers (Paidipaala 1992: 76). By the mid 1970s, dozens of films featuring NTR, starting with *Aggiramudu* (S.M. Sriramulu Naidu 1954), had 'Ramu', 'Ramudu', or 'Rama' in the title.[21]

What does the biographical reference do? Richard Dyer argues that the star image is 'authenticated as something more—truer, more real—than an image' by referring back to his/her existence in the 'real world' (1991: 135). According to Dyer, the mobilization of 'facts' about the star needs to be read as being part of the attempt at the authentication of the star image as a whole. He adds: '[T]he authentication afforded by the ambivalent star-as-image: star-as-real-person nexus resembles nothing so much as a hall of mirrors' (p. 136). Biographical reference is thus one of the ways by which authentication of the star image takes place at the fiction end of stardom.

In the Indian context, Pandian (1992) shows quite persuasively how the authentic image of MGR was created by mobilizing both films and 'biography', with the biography too being fabricated from half-truths and blatant lies about the star's greatness. The point I am trying to make is not about the 'falseness' of the 'authentic' star. After the work by Dyer (1991 and 1994) and Pandian (1992), it is not difficult to show up the falseness of the image which claims authenticity.

Hardgrave Jr. says: 'The [MGR] films are filled with references which blur the role and the actor into one' (1973: 299). That the mass film, like the MGR vehicle, is filled with references to the star-as-real-person, is undeniable. But do these references blur the difference between the role and the actor? While all films work with the double presence of the star (as character and person), I would like to ask why, and to what effect, the 'real' star is a constant referent in the mass film.

The answer is certainly *not* that viewers are fooled into believing that the star is an epitome of goodness in his 'real' life. It is incorrect to make an abrupt transition between the star's construction in the fiction and its effects in the real world. On the contrary, the mass film seems to suggest that it is necessary to make a distinction between the fiction and the 'real' star that exists beyond it.

If the reference to the star's 'real' life is *ubiquitous* practice in cinemas of the world, a question we can ask is what use it is put to in different genres and industries. The big new development in the mass film is in finding *narrative* uses for star recognition. Spectatorial knowledge of the star is interwoven with *history*, not only of the star's roles but also the past of the character played by him.

The mass film's hero is often an orphan but always has a past, which will be recalled later in the film. Like the star himself, the character, too, has a prior history that the spectator is either expected to know, or will be given privileged access that is denied to the characters in the film. In the flashback fragment in *Khaidi*, the spectator alone has access to the star-protagonist's mind in the fiction and *sees* the character's past in an instant. This privileged access to the protagonist finds a resonance often enough in the mass film, when the protagonist, inexplicably enough, knows about something because the *spectator* has seen it. For example, in *Attaku Yamudu Ammayiki Mogudu* (1989) and *Alluda Majaka*, the hero foils the plans of his adversaries exhibiting his awareness of these plans, although the narrative does not indicate that he has either overheard the plotters or been informed by another character. Kalyan/Chiranjeevi, in *Attaku Yamudu Ammayiki Mogudu,* warns his mother-in-law not to provoke him by plotting against him. He then looks into the camera and says, 'You know who I am'. Yes, of course, he is Chiranjeevi and therefore no villain can outwit him, but he is also that entity which sees for and sees because of the spectator.

The degree of intertextual detail in the mass film, especially with reference to the star's biography and oeuvre, allows us to conceive of cinephilia in terms other than those proposed by Lalitha Gopalan. In Gopalan's discussion of the concept, it comes across primarily as *resistance* and contestation that is to be located in the reader's response to the cinema. She makes the interesting but somewhat surprising assertion that 'reading details is very much a feminist project' (2003: 14), and goes on to summarize her analysis of earlier scholars' work on cinephilia thus: 'These critical positions suggest in a roundabout way that cinephiliac readings—the fetishisation of details—open film texts

to other scenes of contestations in public life towards which master theoretical tools broadly gesture in their proclamations of progressive and regressive meanings of films'. Her own work, she adds, is a 'reading of contemporary Indian popular films, where one of the pleasures of working on contemporary Indian cinema surfaces when films read our desires back to us, both regressive and Utopian' (p. 15).

The mass film, like a great deal of popular Indian cinema, is premised on certain reading competencies of its viewers. When an 'incompetent' reader comes across a mass film, it cannot but fall apart. Although I have made arguments on behalf of resisting viewers and counter-hegemonic readings in the past (Srinivas 1997), over the years I have grown suspicious of studies of the popular that are anxious to recover women and other subaltern groups as subjects of a progressive politics (one that is, alas, lost in the domain of politics proper). I would like to suggest that fandom and its objects of obsession do not become any less interesting or politically significant if we stopped treating them as counter-hegemonic.

By way of retrieving cinephilia from simplistic notions of resistance, I would like to show in Chapter 5 how a film form associated with a specific set of spectatorial pleasures might, in fact, have become an obstacle for the transition of the Telugu film industry into a culture industry engaged in the manufacture of cultural commodities which, in turn, generate profits. Towards this end, I suggest that the resistance does not lie at the level of oppositional readings of textually inscribed signs. The web of intertextual detail is meant to be noticed, and not discovered only during acts of rebellion. My ability to catch these details is not an indication of my inclination to offer resistance to the mass film, but a sign that 'I' approximate the spectator which the genre posits, 'getting the point' as 'I' am meant to. What kind of an entity, then, is the spectator of the mass film, who is offered the incitements to cinephilia? From the researcher's point of view, what comes after the narratives of viewer insurrection?

The actions of the star in the mass film, whose status as a star cannot be missed, is presented as if it is a direct consequence of the will of the spectator. While the presence of the whistling fan in the cinema hall is an important detail to keep in mind during the discussion of the mass film, it is not as if the film is speaking to an empirical entity that is already fully formed. The structuring of the introductory sequence, in general, and the moment of arrival of the star, in particular, allows us to see that the film constructs a spectator who *knows* (about the star but

also what to expect), *wills* (the action), and also *trusts* (the narrative to provide pleasure by fulfilling expectations). I will call this abstraction or construct of the mass film the *fan-spectator*. As Willemen (1994: 63) would have it, this is the fan inscribed in the film, not history. It is what the mass film invites its actual viewers to become.

There is a correspondence, an analogy, between the fan-spectator and the actual fans that gather before the screen to watch films. However, it is important not to confuse one for the other. In Chapter 4, I will discuss the critical gap that exists, and, at times, come to the foreground—between the fan-spectator and sections of a film's audiences. It is not my intention to claim that fans' associations are a consequence of the influence of films on sections of the viewers, who have been transformed into zombies modelled on the fan-spectator. However, fan activity cannot be understood except as a response to a certain kind of cinema. It cannot be explained away as a natural consequence or side effect of Dravidian politics (or some pathology endemic to the region due to modes of worship, etc.). The mass film has a dynamic relationship with fan activity in that it is, at once, a response and an incitement to the fan response. The genre's incitement to fandom is 'universal' and targeted at the audience at large, while only a small section of this audience are a part of the sociological phenomenon of fans' associations.

The Moment of Irrationality

The fan-spectator of the mass film is a privileged entity. She has an intimate relationship with the star who performs for her benefit and according to her wishes. The privileging of the spectator returns us to the notion of entitlement, discussed in the previous chapter. Nowhere is this more strikingly evident than during what I will call the *moment of irrationality* in the mass film. Some explanation and disclaimers are in order at this point. The moment of irrationality is quite simply that moment in the film when the magical occurs: dying heroes rise again (*Bhadrachalam* N. Shankar 2001), stones become goddesses (*Ammoru* Kodi Ramakrishna 1995), and saviours are released from vows that prohibit them for fighting (*Big Boss*).[22] The occurrence of such moments is neither limited to the mass film, Telugu cinema, or even other Indian cinemas. I have, elsewhere, drawn attention to the moment of irrationality in *Kung Fu Hustle* (Stephen Chow 2004), a Hong Kong film positioned for the international market (Srinivas 2005). So there can be no question of claiming that this mass film highlight is evidence of the genre's distinction/uniqueness.

As far as the mass film, itself, is concerned, the techniques that go into the production of the moment of irrationality were borrowed from films of other genres and industries, where they were often deployed to flag the occurrence of a supernatural or magical event in the course of the film. In Telugu cinema, the devotional film offers some of the most developed instances of the moment of irrationality in the 1990s. An example which included all the cinematic techniques I draw attention to below, is to be found in the climax of *Sri Srisaila Bhrambhika Kataksham* (B. Vittalacharya 1991).[23] I will also suggest that the prominence of the image of a god in the mass film's moments of irrationality (*Big Boss*, *Bhadrachalam*, to take two examples), is evidence of the source of the borrowing.

Regardless of the genre or industry of its occurrence, the moment of irrationality has some similarities, which will become clear even as I discuss my examples below. However, I would like to confine the discussion to the mass film for obvious reasons of focus. A key issue that surfaces in such moments, is one of verisimilitude. I use verisimilitude, here, in Steve Neale's (2000) sense of the term, to refer to what might be possible or plausible within the fictional universe of a genre. According to Neale, '"Verisimilitude" means "probable", "plausible" or "likely". In addition, it entails notions of propriety, of what is appropriate and *therefore* probable (or probable and therefore appropriate) … Regimes of verisimilitude vary from genre to genre' (2000: 32, original emphasis).

Unlike the occurrences of the magical in folklore or mythological genres, where they are to be found throughout the film, in the mass film, the magical signals a clear deviation from one register of plausibility to another, within the same film. So, it is not as if incredible events occur all the time in the mass film, as they might in the folklore film. These are also moments of spectatorial anxiety, being crucial turning points in the fiction, when the gradual or dramatic surfacing of the possibility of the story being run aground, threatens the comfortable and pleasurable position of the spectator. Anything can happen during the moment of irrationality, provided there is a *willing* spectator, one who (a) is willing to accept the overall frame of plausibility offered by the film in which such a shift of register is acceptable and (b) can actually make the magical happen by actively willing it. The spectacular occurs because it is willed by the spectator and when the narrative explicitly acknowledges the entitlement of the spectator to the fulfilment of her expectations. This acknowledgement is flagged by a disruption in the flow of the narrative that is manifest visually

in the exponential increase in cuts, deliberately unsteady camera, and unusual camera angles.

Khaidi's opening sequence is once again relevant to our discussion. The point just before the fight breaks out, is arguably among the earliest instances of the occurrence of the moment of irrationality, outside the devotional film, in Telugu cinema. As stated above, the building up of the expectation of a fight, culminates in the scene when the barber approaches Suryam with the razor. The morphology of the last part of the sequence, that precedes the outbreak of the fight, is relevant to my discussion. In this sequence, when shots of the barber's approach and the torture in the village are woven together, through the use of editing techniques, a deliberate sense of the disruption is created, as if in preparation for the actual disruption that will follow soon enough. Abrupt changes of point of view and location create the sense of an omniscient spectator who is suddenly everywhere: past and present, village and jail, looking at the hero, looking at the barber, and at the landlord, etc. The sense of momentary disorientation ends with the spectator gaining complete control of the fictional universe and being able to force the narrative towards the hero's (anticipated) escape from captivity. The fight sequence, spectacular by the standards of the time, has the hero exploding in anger and sending men, furniture, and doors flying in all directions. All this violence is immensely pleasurable, precisely because it matches up to the scale of the expectation, which grows in direct proportion to the delay in its fulfilment.

To conclude this section on the thematic and formal concerns of the mass film, the genre is the Telugu film industry's response to the exit of its most important star (NTR). It evolved to produce and showcase other stars as objects of spectatorial pleasure. The mass film gradually emerged as the most significant model for assembling the generic star vehicle and spawned minor genres like the Naxalite film, which were founded on a very different economic model.[24]

A key question that the mass film raises, and one that is not limited to the study of Telugu cinema, is one of the cinema's linkages with politics. The question, itself, is foregrounded in the history of Telugu cinema for two reasons: first, because the mass film is the genre that came after NTR's migration to politics, and second, it produced Chiranjeevi, who, too, followed NTR to make a career in politics. What is interesting about Chiranjeevi's career is that, from around 1993, a good 15 years before he actually made public his desire to contest elections, he was widely expected to follow NTR's trajectory and evidence was

constantly found (manufactured) to 'prove' that this was immanent. As we shall see in the later chapters, 'evidence' often came in the form of political messages that were presumably inserted into his films. In 2008, Chiranjeevi proved that the speculations and rumours were after all justified. The danger of this degree of obviousness, of the apparent political worth of a film genre for a career in politics of its most important star, is that it renders analysis redundant. The fact of the crossover cannot possibly be an explanation. Chiranjeevi's crossover, thus, sharply poses the question of what the connection between cinema and politics might be and challenges us to move beyond the framework of influence and effects of the screen image. The question before me is not what messages in his films make Chiranjeevi's viewers his voters. My question is what kind of a film form produces a star who is destined to retire as a politician? And this form—with its stars and fans—would emerge as the single largest obstacle to the Bollywoodization of Telugu cinema.

Cinematic Populism: *Big Boss* and the Work of the Mass Film

In this section I, would like to argue that Telugu commercial cinema is populist in a foundational way. There are parallels between my attempt to make a case for cinematic populism and Madhava Prasad's argument on 'cine-politics' (1999). Prasad uses cine-politics not only to refer to the historically specific phenomenon of the south Indian star-politician but also to frame his question of what is the specific contribution made by the cinema to the phenomenon. Prasad argues:

> Cine-politics is not about the infusion of star charisma into electoral politics, nor about the use of cinema to disseminate party slogans. It is a distinct form of political engagement that emerged in some of the linguistically defined states of southern India at a certain historical juncture where Indian nationalism's ideological suturing could not take care of certain gaps in the symbolic chain. A set of contingent factors led to a situation where cinema, a form of entertainment that was then [1950s] learning to speak, came to be chosen as the site of a strong political investment, where audiences responded with enthusiasm to an offer of leadership emanating from the screen and, through fans associations that emerged later, established a concrete set of everyday practices that re-affirmed the position of the star as leader (1999: 49).

To sharply pose my problem, I will ignore the mass film's more obvious links with politics/politicians: it's past association with NTR and the role it has played in Chiranjeevi's career. I will also, for the moment,

leave out of consideration the genre's thematic concerns to make an argument about the 'purely cinematic' foundations of its populism.

Regardless of, or indeed in spite of, the seemingly obvious gestures of Telugu cinema towards politics, it is not at the level of thematic concerns of films alone, that the argument on the cinema's political work can be made. Thematic concerns and story level gestures towards one or another political ideology, are, after all, common to a number of cultural forms. Exclusive focus on this level of analysis tends to ignore cinema's specificity. I also do not see much point in discussing films only to reiterate what we always knew about inequality and oppression in our society. The analytical usefulness of the mass film lies in its ability to open up populism of popular culture as the object of critical examination.

Big Boss is the film I focus on to try and make a larger argument on the mass film in this section. The argument hinges on the film's construction of the willing spectator and the peculiar ability of this entity to determine the course of the narrative.

Big Boss was something of a commercial disaster and fans I met in the mid-1990s, were, at times, critical of it. I discovered the film, in a manner of speaking, in an interesting setting. On 1 May 2007, I travelled with a group of Hyderabad based fans of Chiranjeevi to Ongole town, to be a part of the 100-day celebrations of *Hitler*. The event was a special occasion for fans because *Hitler* was Chiranjeevi's comeback film. The star had had a string of box office failures from 1993, with *Alluda Majaka* (1995) proving to be the sole hit. Worse still, due to a series of coincidences, the star had no new releases in 1996. All this led to declarations by 'rivals' in fan circles that Chiranjeevi was 'finished'. With the success of *Hitler*, the Chiranjeevi fan was back in business. As it turned out, Ongole, the district headquarters of Prakasam, was saturated with sights and sounds related to Chiranjeevi films. His fans were quite literally all over the place, having descended by the thousands. Local cinemas were screening re-runs of *Alluda Majaka* and the walls were plastered with posters, not only of this film but also those produced by fans. Through most of the day, vehicles blaring music from his films roamed the town, along with others which had groups of Chiranjeevi fans shouting slogans in favour of the star. We reached Ongole early in the morning and checked into a small hotel, where a room had already been booked for the group. Through the morning and early afternoon, we made unsuccessful attempts at sighting the stars, who were to arrive at a posh hotel nearby. The afternoon heat drove us indoors and

someone switched on the black and white television in the room. While he was flipping channels out of sheer boredom, standing right before the set because there was no remote control, he discovered that the local cable network was showing *Big Boss*. There was no more channel surfing that afternoon. The choice of the film by the cable operator was, no doubt, determined by the fact that this, among the few recent films of Chiranjeevi, had had an official release in the video format. The crawler at the bottom of the screen announced that the 100-day celebrations of *Hitler* would be telecast live. I made a quick note of the announcement in my mind—I did not know such things happened.

In January 1995, I spent a day on the sets of *Big Boss,* in Madras, and was, thus, curious to watch it when the film would be released later that year. I had watched the film twice during its theatrical release in 1995, and was disappointed each time. But, in Ongole, while waiting for the event commemorating the return of Chiranjeevi, it seemed to be the most appropriate film to watch. After all, it has Ali playing a Chiranjeevi fan. Soon, I was surprised by our collective enjoyment of the film, in particular my own, since I was not even a fan who had something to celebrate. It is possible that any other Chiranjeevi film would have worked just as well on that occasion. In any case, my intention is not to subject our Ongole experience of the film to detailed examination. *Big Boss*, or rather my varied responses to it, stayed in my mind as a puzzle that I could not quite solve. Upon revisiting the film, yet again, a decade later, it is possible for me to suggest that the film's inducement to fandom is striking indeed. I had perhaps *become* a fan, thanks to favourable conditions, in my third viewing of the film in Ongole.

Big Boss is a mass film to the core, but not in the sense that it is likely to appeal only to certain sections of the audience, the so-called masses. The film is singularly dedicated to the construction of the fan-spectator that wills the film into existence. It is shoddily produced, which is quite scandalous given its budget and casting, and also replete with 'movie mistakes' (including a flashback within a flashback, incorrect naming of place of action), poor editing, etc.

The film's director, Vijay Bapineedu, was the editor of *Megastar Chiranjeevi*, and it was on the sets of this film that I spoke to him about the magazine. His involvement in the affairs of fans is likely to have played some role in determining the shape of the film and its saturation with cues that are meant to be picked up by fans 'in the know'. There is no need to read too much into the director's biography because, by this time, the Chiranjeevi vehicle was, in any case, enveloped by a web

of intertextual references and other forms of play with star recognition. There are two striking elements in this film: first, the centrality of the figure of the fan to the imaging of political subjects who are led by the star-protagonist, and second, the relationship they in turn have with the hero.

Prasad (1998: 138–59) notes that by the 1970s, the Hindi film hero's companion was already transformed into a fan or admirer of the character. This development is evident in Telugu films, too. Unlike anything that we have seen in the previous appearances of the comedian-cum-admirer, this film has a Chiranjeevi fan, who is seen worshipping a cutout of the star when the Chiranjeevi character (Surendra) meets him for the first time. This fan also *believes*, in spite of the insistence of Surendra, that he has indeed been blessed by the arrival of the star into his life. Through the rest of the film, he refuses to make the distinction between the character and the star and treats Surendra as if he would his idol, and eventually dies to save him from a time bomb set by the villains.

If conditional loyalty is the key to understanding the domains of fans proper, what does the examination of the mass film do to strengthen or challenge this understanding? The deployment of the figure of the fan flags the film's larger attempt to define a *political* relationship between star-protagonist and the masses within the fiction. Surendra is Big Boss, the leader of a basti. At different points of time in the film, a large crowd is, at once, the passive addressee and witness of actions that he performs. But the masses are much more than supplicants. They have entitlements and the star-protagonist for his part is obliged to act on their behalf, even at the expense of his relationship with his family members.

The film's story revolves around the evolution of the unemployed youth Bavaraju Surendra, Ba.Su. (or Boss as his friends call him) into a slumlord. Through a series of flashbacks, it is revealed that Surendra is the descendent of a zamindari family seeking revenge against his paternal uncle, Varadaraju (Kota Srinivas Rao) and his wife Damayanti (Jyothilakshmi, the legendary screen vamp of the 1970s), who killed his father and grandfather, made his brother a cripple, and banished his family from a life of luxury. Knowing that his mother would not approve of his attempts to seek revenge, he secretly rejects job offers and moves to Hyderabad, where the villains have become important members of the city's underworld. In the city, he confronts the son of the benevolent gangster Ankineedu (Vijay Chander) for assaulting

Durga (Madhavi, Surendra's landlady). Ankineedu is impressed with Surendra and offers him a job but the latter turns it down. The chief villains, Varadaraju and Damayanti, convince Ankineedu's son to kill his father and take over the gang. Ankineedu is killed but Surendra drives Ramineedu away from the basti and becomes the 'Boss' of the locality. Varadaraju, with the help of the corrupt police official, Yadagiri (Tanikella Bharani), makes a number of attempts to defeat Surendra by targeting his family. Surendra's mother (Sujata) and brother (Sivaji) are brought to Hyderabad by a family friend. Yadagiri marries Surendra's sister (Kalpana) and recruits her to pressurize the hero to accept the false charges fabricated by the police. Surendra's mother (Sujata), who does not approve of her son's attempt to seek revenge, persuades him to perform the 40-day ritual associated with Lord Ayyappa, which, among other things prohibits the devotees from displaying anger. Yadagiri inadvertently disrupts the ritual and triggers off events leading to the final confrontation between the villain and Surendra. In the film's climax, Surendra kills the villain with his mother's approval.

In terms of its thematic concerns, too, the film is a typical mass film. The crisis in the feudal family is traceable to events that took place a generation earlier, after Varadaraju, the eldest son of the zamindar (Somayajulu), is discovered to be a criminal. The flashback within the flashback in the film, in fact, begins with the disruption of the family's celebration of Independence Day, with the arrival of Varadaraju at the site of the gathering, being chased by the police. The zamindar hands him over to the police and decides to disinherit him. Damayanti seduces the family lawyer and has the text of the documents changed. She then kills the old man and Varadaraju kills the lawyer. As it turns out, Damayanti gives birth to the lawyer's son. For his part, the chief villain has the mannerisms of a *hijra* (trans-gendered person) and even calls himself a 'two-in-one' person, openly hinting at his indeterminate gender status. All the families we come across in the film are fractured and also similarly marked by the absence or the inadequacy of male authority figures. These include, in addition to Surendra's family, Durga's family (she is a widow), and that of Ankineedu (he is presumably a widower and has little control over his son), and the heroine Roja (she does not have a mother, her father is crippled by the villains, and she grows up to be a petty crook, with her grandmother as her chief assistant). Finally, there is Varadaraju, Damayanti, and their illegitimate son.

In the mass film, especially from the late 1990s, we notice that the illegitimacy of authority is gendered in interesting ways: transgendered men and/or aggressive women (often widows, vamps, and women separated from or dominating their husbands) are important signs of the absence of legitimate authority figures.[25] In the next chapter, I will discuss the critical importance of the displays of the hero's 'surplus' masculinity in the mass film's attempt at resolving the crisis. The female characters of this film are striking. First, there are a number of female characters with significant roles.[26] With the exception of the hero's sister, who finds an exploitative husband (Yadagiri, the corrupt police official), all of them are marked by their detachment from male authority, and this is presented as an important sign of the problem which the hero will solve. In *Big Boss*, the back and forth movement of the film alerts us to the extent to which movement into the future resembles, and is dependent on, the nostalgia for the past, destroyed by Varadaraju and Damayanti, the hijra-vamp couple.

In the film, orphanhood has a societal dimension: the basti is characterized by the absence of the authority/protector figure and is ruled by illegitimate authorities. At one point, Surendra drags Ramineedu to Ankineedu and reminds the old man that Durga, assaulted by the latter, was under the gang's protection. Ankineedu, represented as a gentleman gangster, immediately sees the point and slaps his son in public, to make his displeasure clear. So when Surendra steps into Ankineedu's shoes, we see that he is doing so by displacing an *illegitimate claimant to Ankineedu's legacy*. When the film begins, Surendra has already solved the problem at the societal level and is left with the much more challenging task of 'reclaiming what was once ours': the feudal inheritance, not only the palatial house belonging to his grandfather, but also a family organized around a benevolent male authority.

As in the films of the earlier generation of superstars, NTR and MGR, the reorganization of the family and society are neatly fused together—the same villains cause the disintegration of both. Vigilantism is the solution to the problems faced in both the private and public domains. Also sourced from the later films of NTR, is the importance of the problem of generation change and inheritance: of the responsibility and authority of a younger star-protagonist who will emerge as the new centre of family and society. The newness of the mass film, as pointed out earlier, lies in the movement of the genre away from making direct links between a parental authority figure and his successor (as in the films featuring NTR in double roles of father and son).[27] The

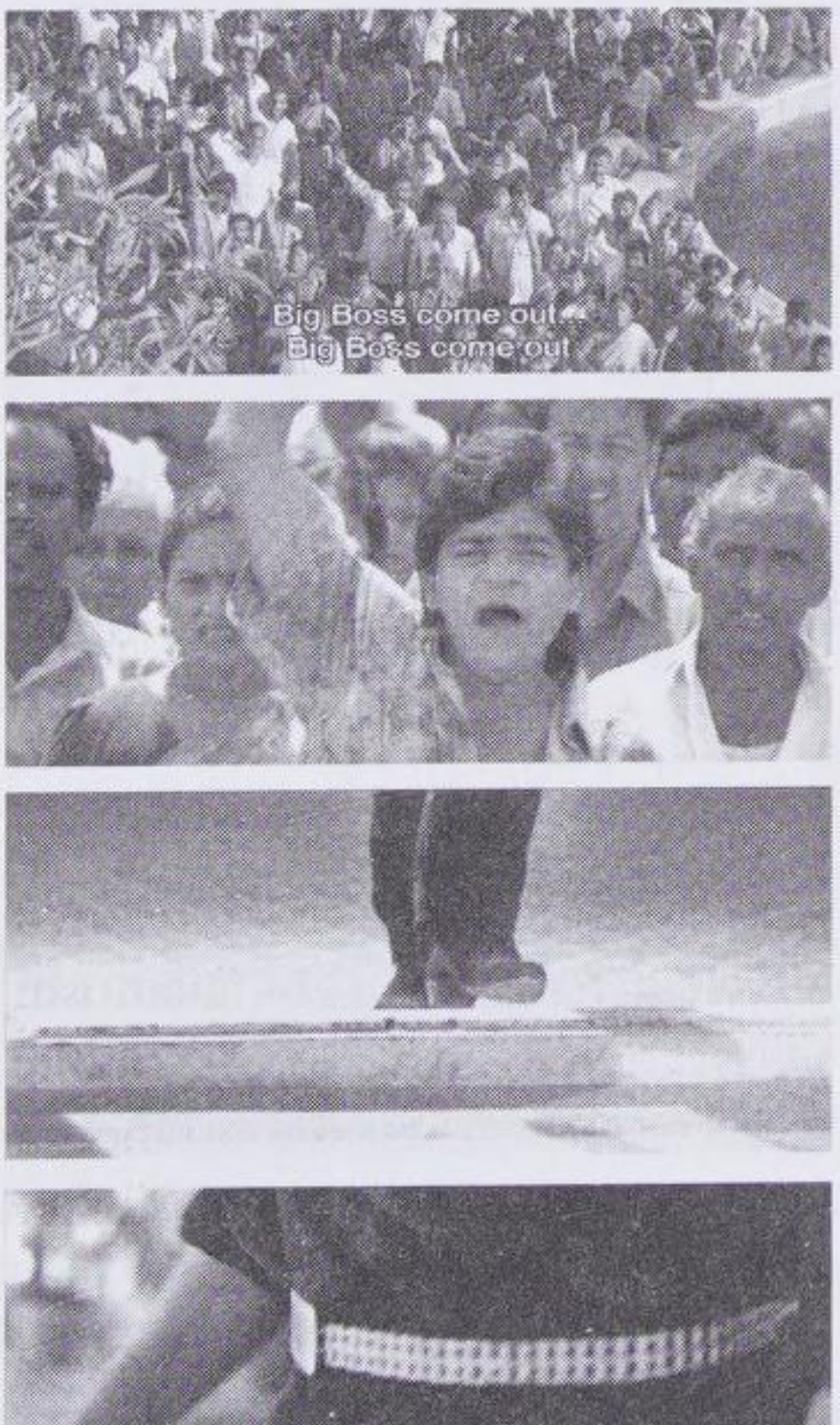
authentication of the authority figure of the mass film is not founded on his age, but occurs in spite of his youth. To understand how this happens, we need to examine how the genre deploys stars.

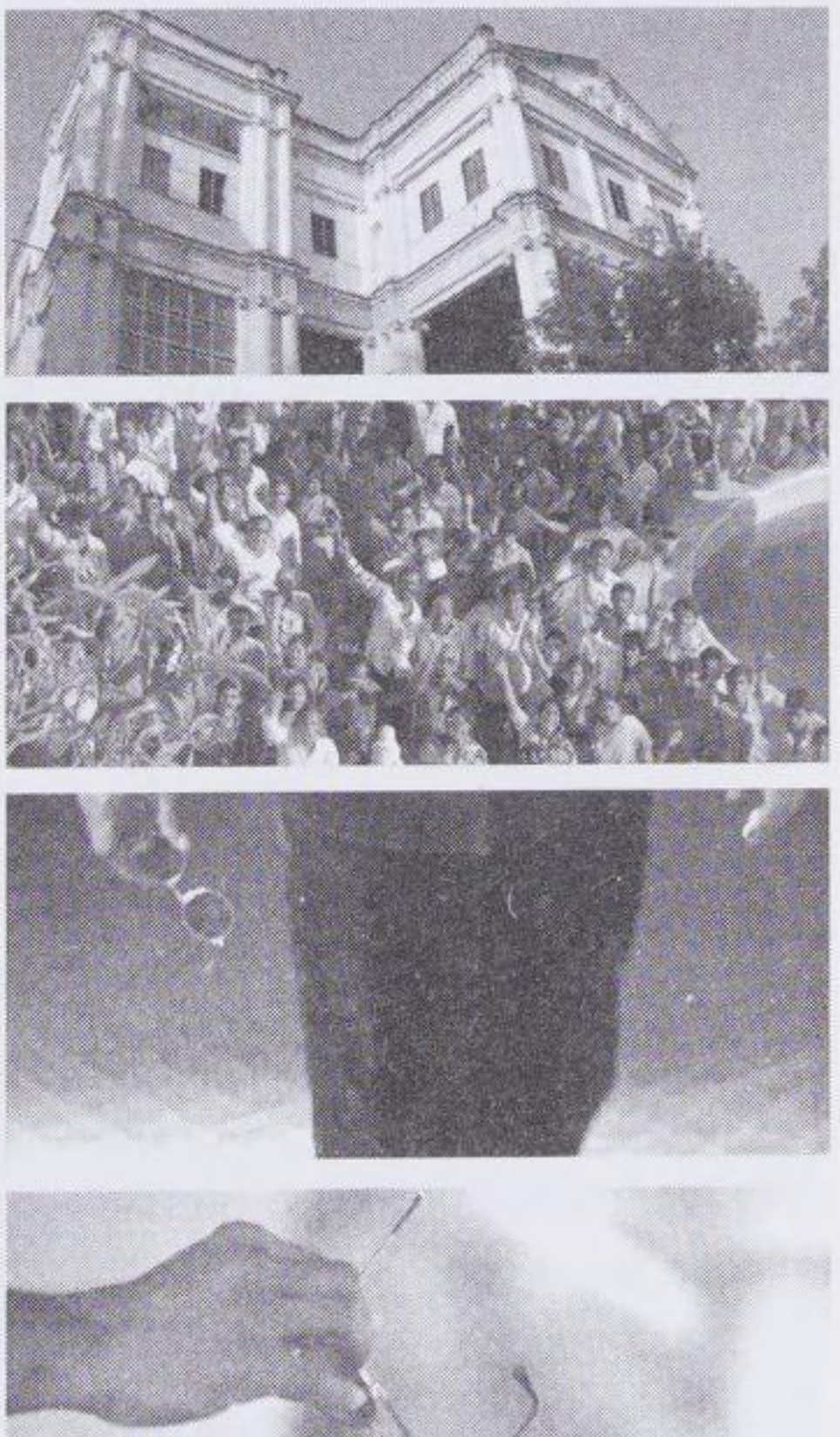
The mass film's amplification of techniques, identified with an earlier generation of stars, reaches something of a high point in the early 1990s work of Chiranjeevi, and this film is a good example of the level of sophistication achieved by the genre by this time. In the following pages, I will draw attention to the underlying populism of the generic techniques of the mass film that are deployed in *Big Boss*.

'Big Boss Must Come Out'

The film opens with a large crowd looking at the camera, which is placed at a higher level. The crowd is chanting 'Big Boss *baitaku raavaali*' (Big Boss must come out). Leading the crowd is the comedian, Ali, whose role as the shopkeeper and Chiranjeevi's fan we are as yet unaware of. The reverse shot reveals the empty balcony of an imposing

'Big Boss Must Come Out'





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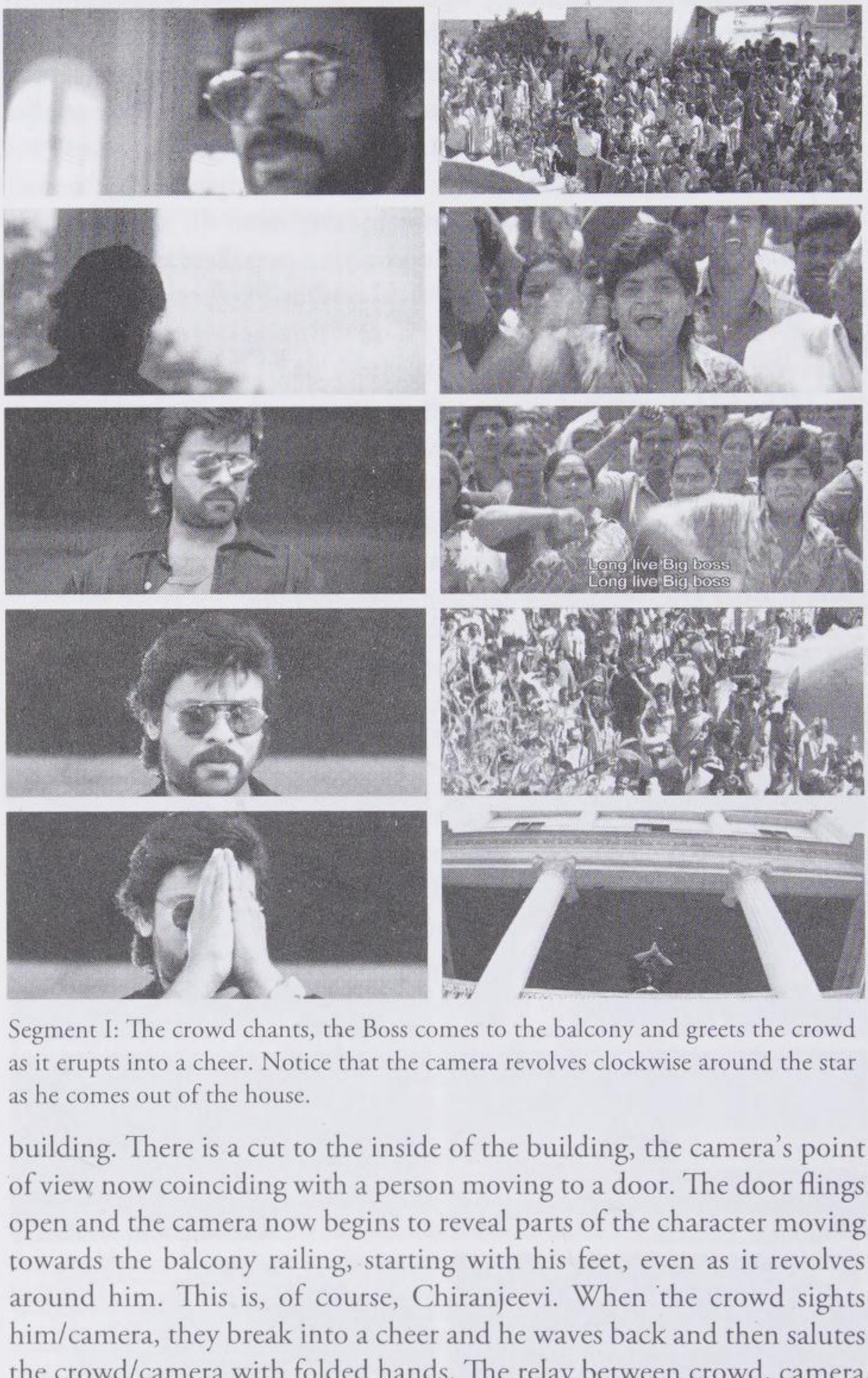


Segment I: The crowd chants, the Boss comes to the balcony and greets the crowd as it erupts into a cheer. Notice that the camera revolves clockwise around the star as he comes out of the house.

building. There is a cut to the inside of the building, the camera's point of view now coinciding with a person moving to a door. The door flings open and the camera now begins to reveal parts of the character moving towards the balcony railing, starting with his feet, even as it revolves around him. This is, of course, Chiranjeevi. When the crowd sights him/camera, they break into a cheer and he waves back and then salutes the crowd/camera with folded hands. The relay between crowd, camera, and star continues through the rest of this short sequence, in which members of the crowd sing his praises. A man thanks him for ridding

the basti of rowdy *mamullu* (protection fees), while a woman is grateful to him for saving their families/domestic life (*samsaralu*). Big Boss assures them that he is always willing to kill or be killed in his battle against evil. The crowd claps and he turns and goes back inside.

The ability of the spectator to relay information to the star protagonist, surfaces on a number of occasions in the film. The spectator of the film is a privileged entity, indeed, and this is established during the opening sequence itself. When Big Boss gets past the doorway leading inside, he pauses and half turns, as if instructing invisible assistants and the doors shut on the camera. The next cut is to the other side of the closed doors: the crowd has now been left outside and the spectator—who is no

Segment II: Members of the crowd praise the Boss. He gives them an assurance that he is willing to kill or be killed in his battle against evil.

Segment III: He turns away from the balcony, goes inside his house and is followed by the camera. He speaks to his mother's photograph saying, 'We have to regain what we have lost'. The film's first flashback begins at this point.

longer a part of the crowd but has special access to the protagonist—is alone with him. The camera peers over the shoulder of Big Boss to show him talking to the photograph of his mother, acknowledging that she would disapprove of him turning into a Boss/gangster in the city. He is, nevertheless, obliged to fulfil his responsibilities as her son. He tells the photograph, 'We have to regain what we have lost'. There is a close-up on the framed photograph and the movie cuts to the past. His story unfolds for the benefit of the spectator alone—the diegetic listener is completely done away with.

I will return to the film's flashback below, and will stay with the star-spectator relationship for now. One set of 'movie mistakes' in the film is a direct consequence of this relationship. We notice that, on a number of occasions, Surendra turns up quite inexplicably in the vicinity of places where villains are scheming. The film does not even bother to show him looking at or listening to the villains secretly, in order to establish a realistic link between the event/conversation that occurred before the camera and the hero's awareness of what transpired. Instead, he is seen at a distance from the scene of action, merely looking in the general direction of the camera, suggesting that the relay between the star and the spectator's point of view is at issue and not the establishment of the fact of his looking at/hearing something. For example, early in the flashback narrative, as he gets off the bus at Hyderabad, he 'sees' a meeting between the local gangsters. The issue is a territorial dispute and the incident establishes Ankineedu's sense of honour and Varadaraju's villainy. During the long exchange and a shootout between the gangsters, Surendra is on a bridge, which presumably overlooks the scene of action. Quite clearly the bridge is not a part of the geography of the confrontation, which occurs on a large open ground. There is actually no need for the hero to be shown as being present near the scene of action at all because, in most Indian films, the flashback is only a notional narration of the story from a character's point of view. Indeed, this film has a flashback within the flashback, which reveals events that occurred during the hero's childhood, and in this narrative, the hero simply knows about the evil deeds of his uncle and aunt without the child being present anywhere near the scene. The 'mistake', thus, is for the film to make the extra effort and to have Surendra appear on the scene of the gangsters' meeting and yet not establish the plausibility of him actually witnessing the action. The sequence is, nevertheless, necessary because it establishes the relay between the spectator's knowledge and the protagonist's. The hero has to be somewhere near the site of

action, only to ensure the establishment of eye contact confirming the relay of knowledge. On another occasion, Surendra is seen loitering at a distance from Varadaraju's house, just after the latter and his wife tell Ankineedu's son to kill the old man. Surendra moves on immediately after the camera spots him.

The most remarkable of these movie mistakes occurs after the first confrontation between Surendra and the villains, soon after moving into the basti. He captures a murderer and hands him over to the police. At the police station, Surendra actually claims to be an *eyewitness* to the murder, although he is seen inside the house while the murder is taking place in another part of the basti and it is only the scream of the dying man, which draws Surendra outdoors. Surendra has not seen the murder, but, nevertheless, *knows* who the murderer is because the *spectator* has seen him.

Returning to the discussion of the genre's references to the 'biography' of the star, it is now possible for us to see that the star-spectator relationship is critically dependent on the latter's constant awareness of the fact of the protagonist's stardom. The spectator cannot but be aware at all times that the character is the star in disguise. Even by mass film standards, the length to which *Big Boss* goes to foreground the presence of Chiranjeevi-the-star in the fiction is remarkable. Earlier, I mentioned in passing a song shot before a gathering of Chiranjeevi fans in which the star plays himself. One of the lines in this song, which is sung by the star, is: *Na laife na fans* (my life is my fans). At various points in the film, we see posters of his films and copies of *Megastar Chiranjeevi*, hear the titles of his films, snatches of songs, and one-liners from earlier films.

Big Boss allows us to see that the spectator's knowledge is of two kinds. First, it is cognitive: the ability to recognize the star, not just as such-and-such person, but as someone who is an agent of spectatorial expectation and fulfilment, who is at all times trusted and at times commanded. Second, it has to do with history: the star is the embodiment of a screen history, one that certainly includes his previous roles but also recalls the memory of the pleasure of cinema itself. This knowledge is worked into the structuring of the film's narrative to create a protagonist who, like the star himself, has a past that over-determines his present actions. The production of Surendra along the twin axes of pastness—of the star and the character—is critical to the film. While the multiple intertextual references to Chiranjeevi's stardom constitute one axis, the other revolves around the complicated flashbacks of the film.

There is Always a Flashback

In the mass film, there is *always* a flashback. This narrative device is as ubiquitous as the biographical reference. The stories inevitably begin in *media res* and the narration of past events occurs in the form of the full-blown flashback, running into half an hour or more. This is preceded by flashback fragments or other hints anticipating the longer narration. In *Big Boss,* there is a flashback within a flashback, which is anticipated through a series of hints. The first sign of the second flashback is the hero's glance at a dilapidated old building when he arrives at Hyderabad in the first flashback. We immediately recognize it as the building from which Big Boss waved to his supporters in the opening sequence and realize that the past and future are closely related. In the second flashback, it is revealed that this is the same building in which the extended family lived during Surendra's childhood and the one he will take over as a part of his attempt to 'regain what was ours'.

The flashback is the fictional equivalent of the star-as-real-person that the genre constantly gestures towards. Surendra, now Big Boss, and in the first flashback, an unemployed youth, is actually more than an unemployed youth-turned-gangster. At the back of it all is the awareness of the n+1st level of distinction: he is Chiranjeevi at all times but his distinction is demonstrable at the fictional level, too, and it is to this effect that the flashback is deployed. There is no mystery or suspense in the back and forth movement of the story because the 'revelation' is along expected lines (after all the flashback is a formulaic element). At issue, therefore, is not the supposed innocence of the spectator but her acute awareness of the rules of the game and therefore the investment in the fiction and the star himself.

What is revealed, at the story level, in the course of the flashback narratives in *Big Boss*? A feudal past, vendetta and a motive for revenge. Apparently, the film is making a double regression: the first being a return to the feudal origins as a source of the hero's distinction, which could be read as regression since the mass film, in general, and Chiranjeevi's vehicles, in particular, often did away with this mode of justifying the hero's distinction; and the second, the more interesting regression in the mass film as a whole, the avenging of a personal/familial wrong, and not a societal one. This double regression eventually justifies the hero's final confrontation with the villain. Flashback revelations establish the continuity between the breakdown of the social order (not to mention law and order) and the crisis in the family. There is also a demonstrable equivalence between two sets of obligations of Surendra: to family and

friends on the one hand, and the society, where *pure altruism* of the hero is established, on the other. On the face of it, altruism is secondary to familial obligations because the hero's actions are so clearly guided by personal revenge.

Big Boss maintains the distinction between the two sets of obligations of the hero and even creates a tension between them on occasion. For example, when Surendra's sister comes to him with a request to accept the false charges of the police, the women of the *basti*, led by Durga, argue that he should not do so, not even for the sake of his sister. Surendra refuses to accede to his sister's wishes. How and why the film makes the distinction between these two sets of obligations, which not only converge on the elimination of the villains but are also simultaneously in conflict, is a significant aspect of its populism.

The film has two beginnings, one set in the present, and the other, in the past, when the hero was still an unemployed youth. The star is introduced twice over, first in the 'Big Boss *baitaku raavaali*' sequence (discussed above), and then in the flashback, when he drives away bootleggers who have taken over the freedom fighters' land. The film also has two endings. There is the literal ending, when the story finally draws to a close with the killing of the villains. But prior to that, there is another climax of sorts, when the film's moment of irrationality occurs. This climax allows us to see clearly how the film relates to, but simultaneously distinguishes between the two tasks of the hero (seeking revenge and cleaning up society of illegitimate authority figures).

The moment of irrationality comes as the fitting response to the prolonged display of cruelty by Yadagiri, now Surendra's brother-in-law. Yadagari's atrocities are committed against the public gathered before the house, as also Surendra's brother and mother. The confrontation between the police officer and hero also takes place in full view of the public. This is the climax *for the masses*—on the screen and before it—and unfolds with their active encouragement and against the explicitly expressed wishes of Surendra's mother, who has not only persuaded him to perform the Ayyappa ritual but also remain indoors while Yadagiri is on a rampage outside. I will discuss this in some detail below.

There is a qualitative difference between the emotional charge of the first or mass climax and the second or family sentiment climax, which, in spite of its high degree of violence, comes across as a fairly routine affair, of the kind that has repeaters leaving the cinema hall. Why should this be the case when the story seems to suggest that the

chief motivation for the hero's actions is avenging the harm done to his family by the villains? Presumably, the narrative works to ensure that the obligations of the hero to the society are not rendered insignificant, but this is hardly an explanation because the explanation does not lie at the story level at all.

In very different ways, *Mutha Mestri*, which I will discuss in detail in the next chapter, and *Big Boss* unravel the working of cinematic populism. A story level justification for the production of spectatorial effect is quite clearly a pre-requisite for both films. In *Mutha Mestri*, where the hero's final confrontation with the villains is triggered off by the sister's suicide, the protagonist's personal tragedy ensures that the justification for his subsequent actions (which include his resignation as minister) is made on emotional grounds. In *Big Boss* however, the actual act of revenge—and the death of the main villains—is more of a story level necessity. The most emotionally charged, and therefore satisfying, climax is already over by the time the film arrives at its ending. This, too, is a 'movie mistake', in a manner of speaking, because the climax, by definition, comes at the end of the film. By splitting the climax into two parts, the film allows us to see how the narrative has to work to make the spectator *want to determine the course of action*. And in the mass film's scheme of things, a kid-goat might do just as well as a dead father.

'Your Honour, What Sin did the Innocent Kid-Goat Commit . . . ?'

A good starting point for the discussion in this section is M. Madhava Prasad's argument on the *aesthetic of mobilization* (1998: 138–159). He coins the phrase in his discussion of the 1970s vehicles of Amitabh Bachchan, which, he points out, are quite centrally concerned with the on-screen mobilization of various groups of usually underprivileged people under the leadership of the hero. He sums up his arguments thus:

> The originality of the textual form [which draws on borrowed sources like the Western] derives primarily from the mobilization effect which accompanies the narration. The scenes of nomination, in which the hero is elected to lead workers and minorities, function to extend the relationship of leader and the led to the audience as well. The figure who commands the audience in this way is the star. The star's function is mobilization, the rallying of forces behind a narrative exposition. This elevation compensates for the loss of the hero's traditional

authority, and enacts a transition from feudal to populist power. Through the production of a supplemental charisma, the industry overcomes the problems posed by a shift of narrative focus to the realm of the ordinary (p. 158).

The presence of diegetic audiences, as passive witnesses of the protagonist's heroism, is one of the signs of this aesthetic at work. Prasad goes on to note that the extra-cinematic authority, which accrues, due to the carrying over of the star-as-mobilizer image, not only from film to film but also from beyond the screen into the 'real' world, was unprecedented in Hindi cinema but was well in place in south Indian industries, where, stars were already mobilizers. He makes two additional points. First, 'Amitabh Bachchan did not enter politics until much later in his career, but, even in the formative stage, his star-image had a political dimension that paralleled MGR's.' So, whereas in MGR's case, screen mobilization was simultaneous with off-screen political activity, in Bachchan's case—like NTR's and Chiranjeevi's—the actual transition into politics was a later development.

More importantly, '[t]he Amitabh Bachchan phenomenon can be said to represent the arrival of populism on the national arena. Populism, employing the supplement of charisma produced in the scenes of election and nomination, enables the control of the text's meaning-production from a point outside it' (p. 158).

I have some problems with Prasad's conceptualization of how stars work, on- and off-screen. Prasad makes an easy connection between Bachchan's vehicles and his stint as politician. In comparison with both MGR and NTR, Bachchan has been a relatively minor politician, although the three of them can be said to have had a similar stature as stars. NTR featured in the remakes of Bachchan's film and both stars entered the political arena in the early 1980s. However, there is really no comparison between the two as politicians.[28] Nevertheless, Prasad's concept is an important starting point for an inquiry into the relationships between stars' on- and off-screen mobilizations and it does so by noting the analogy between the locations of the star vis-à-vis the masses in both films and society. Prasad's later work (1999) draws attention to the specificity of south Indian stars in politics, and, interestingly, he does not return to the aesthetic of mobilization in it. This is perhaps a sign that Prasad's earlier explanatory frame does not work as well with south Indian stars, as against Bachchan.

My argument, tries to locate populism at the level of spectatorial positioning, which is undoubtedly reinforced by populist themes of the

mass film and requires the presence of on-screen crowds, too, in its mass film avatar. To say that the star of the mass film is seen leading the masses would be to state the obvious, but an inadequate explanation for how a film can be claimed to be populist. We need to explain the complex relationship between the star, the diegetic masses, and the spectator. I will build my case with the help of the moment of irrationality in *Big Boss*.

First, let me discount the obvious: the scene in question unfolds before a huge crowd of diegetic onlookers and the hero, no doubt, represents the masses and acts on their behalf, reducing them to cheering bystanders. But the key element in the structuring of the sequence is spectatorial anticipation or will.

In order to draw attention to the intended emotional effect of the sequence in question and the production of affect as its *raison d'être*, I will begin at a point after the action is fully over and the hero stands before a judge, accused of assaulting a police officer (Yadagiri, his brother-in-law). The judge asks Surendra whether or not he assaulted the inspector. He replies in the affirmative and in his defence lists the misdeeds of the inspector that provoked him to act. He lists them in the exact sequence that they occurred: Yadagiri terrorized the crowd and even caused a miscarriage, etc. At one point Surendra asks the judge: 'Your honour, what sin did the innocent kid-goat commit …?'

It is amusing that Surendra refers to the ill treatment of the kid-goat with the same degree of passion as the serious crimes committed by the inspector. But the juxtaposition is intended to recruit the judge as a collaborator, after the event, in an act of retaliatory violence that was willed by the spectator. In fact, *Surendra recalls for the judge what the spectator saw*—he himself was locked up inside his house while Yadagiri was on rampage. The courtroom speech attempts to extend the affective economy of the just concluded moment of irrationality into the space of the court: therefore the kid-goat.

The moment of irrationality in *Big Boss* is a good example of how a narrative crisis is created in the mass film, in spite of the superhuman abilities of the genre's hero. In *Gangleader* and in *Big Boss*, the hero is prevented from confronting problems head-on because of familial obligations. In *Gangleader*, the source of the family's suffering is the hero's misguided sister-in-law and in *Big Boss* it is his mother's refusal to allow him to battle the villain. The mother persuades him to undertake the Ayyappa swamy *deeksha*, which involves the abstinence from meat, liquor, sex, and display of emotions.[29] The sequence begins with the

hero undertaking the *deeksha*. He is dressed in the black dress of the Ayyappa devotee and receives the mala, which marks the beginning of the ritual.

Just as Surendra begins to eat his yellow and insipid-looking vegetarian meal, Yadagiri arrives and begins to shout abuses at him. He has come to implicate Surendra in a murder that the latter did not commit and decides to make a production of the event. He begins by abusing Surendra before the public that gathers before the house. Yadagiri is confronted by the *basti* dwellers who are offended by his insults to the Big Boss. When he slaps a young man who questions him, the latter's pregnant wife warns him that an abuse to their hero will result in a retaliation even from unborn children. At this point Yadagiri hits her on her stomach, saying he will not wait for such children to be born. She faints and is rushed to hospital. He then picks up a kid-goat, presumably belonging to Surendra's brother, and hurls it to the ground. Surendra's handicapped brother protests, only to be hit by the inspector. The mother then comes out of the house and tells Yadagiri that Surendra is doing pooja. With a view to bringing Surendra out, he slaps the mother too. Surendra comes out but does not retaliate. Yadagiri ridicules his *deeksha* and pulls at his mala. When mala snaps, Surendra is released from his vow to his mother and god. He takes off his black shirt, wipes the vermillion off his forehead, and thrashes the inspector as the crowd takes up the Ayyappa devotee's chant: 'Swamy Saranam, Ayyappa Saranam'.

Through much of the sequence, there is a clear spatial separation between Yadagiri and Surendra. Yadagiri's behaviour is prompted by the need to bring Surendra out of the house. Each time he performs an act of cruelty before the crowd outside, there is a cut to Surendra who is seen reacting instantly with shock or pain, inside, as if he is a witness to what is happening. These cuts ensure that the spectator is at once positioned as a member of the crowd but also acts as the relay of the crowd's point of view to the hero, establishing a link between Surendra and the crowd outside. There is a further link that is established. As with some other occurrences of the moment of irrationality in this film, too, there is an invocation of god as a critical pivot in the relay between various places, characters, and points of view. While Surendra offers *arti* to the idol of Ayyappa he looks directly at the camera, as if it is the god who approximates to the camera, watching Surendra and the events outside. But he could well be offering *arti* to the spectator, reminding him of his power to make things happen. A change of course in the flow

of events is only expected now because a crisis point has been reached in the narrative, with the hero being rendered impotent.

The structuring of the sequence allows for a fascinating inversion: *the spectator is god*, not a passive witness to the events that fold. The actions of Yadagiri enhance the spectator's expectation of a suitably violent reaction from the hero. However, one more critical development precedes/accompanies the fighting. Once his necklace is broken, Surendra prepares himself elaborately for the fight. While he is preparing to address spectatorial expectation, the crowd begins to *act out* the spectator's sense of anticipation and relief by cheering Surendra on with the chant 'Swamy Saranam …' The camera, now, alternately revolves around Surendra and from the centre of the circle formed by the crowd, he sees the crowd seeing him. The masses and their hero are now visually and spatially linked. The crisis passes over.

In *Big Boss*, as in other major mass films of the 1990s, populism can be located at two distinct levels. The first is at the level of its fiction. The

The Innocent Kid-Goat

(*contd.*)

presence of crowds, the hero's ability to protect their interests, and in the process relegating them to the position of a diegetic audience, would be the obvious signs of this level of the elaboration of populism. This level is accounted for by Prasad's notion of the aesthetic of mobilization. The second is at the level of spectatorial positioning. By deploying a variety of techniques, the film constantly reminds the spectator that the fictional world exists for his benefit and unfolds along anticipated lines.

The political role played by the star in the fiction, is an extension of his mandate to act according to the spectator's will. This role—of being the agent of the spectator's will, of displaying at all times the recognition of an obligation to a spectator who is in turn entitled to make a series of demands on him—played by the star in the fiction, is analogous to his location in the fan domain. In both domains the star is obliged to fulfil the demands of the fan/spectator. Fandom, in turn, is evidence of the leakage of the willing spectator into the extra-cinematic domain, even as there is a textual inscription of the fan in the production of the genre's spectator.

An actual fan—a member of a fans' association—is not the same as the fan-spectator, who is but an abstraction. Simultaneously, in spite of the minority status of the actual fan vis-à-vis the film viewing public and his obvious and offensive/embarrassing excesses, there is no reason to be believe that the fan has a qualitatively different relationship with the fan-spectator, from decent people like us. The film invites all viewers

to be approximate to the fan-spectator. The fact of the matter is that no one is fully transformed into this entity. The degrees of separation between different audience groups may be striking at times (discussed in Chapter 4).

The moment of irrationality, whose inverse logic ensures that events unfold according to the injunctions of the willing spectator, made a brief but notable appearance during Chiranjeevi's first media conference on 17 August 2008, formally announcing his decision to enter politics. During his replies to reporters' questions, Chiranjeevi not only made repeated references to his films (he even recalled a line from *Tagore*) and film titles (especially *Andarivadu* [everybody's man]), but also insisted that he was entering politics because he was being called upon to do

(*contd.*)

so by the people. He drew attention to a suicide note left by a fan/supporter (in February 2008) appealing to the star to improve the lives of common people by entering politics.[30] In politics as in films, the star arrives only because the fan-spectator was whistling interminably.

Let me not give the impression that the willing spectator surfaces only in Telugu and other south Indian cinemas, or that this entity inevitably finds itself thrust into electoral politics. In the Hindi film *Om Shanti Om* (Farah Khan 2008), which exemplifies Ashish Rajadhyaksha's notion of the Bollywoodization of Indian cinema (2003) to the last window of revenue, Shah Rukh Khan plays the role of the endearing but bumbling fool of a movie extra. The one thing that the extra gets right is his understanding of how cinema works. He figures out that if

you will it hard and long enough, it will happen. The film cannot be said to be over till then. He tries to apply this principle to life, realizes that it does not work and dies. In the second half Shah Rukh Khan reappears, this time as a highly successful film star who does not know his cinema because he inherited his stardom from his father. The problem that the narrative now addresses is one of transferring critical insights and knowledge (the latter is plot related) that the dead extra had, to the star. The star is soon possessed by the dead extra, who, like the film spectator belongs to another time. The star soon learns that stardom is about becoming what the spectator wants him to. That is not all. In the film's climax, the star is so engrossed in the extra's revenge drama that he now becomes the willing spectator and brings the latter's heartthrob and heroine of yesteryears (Deepika Padukone) back from the dead. The ghost of the dead heroine appears and plays the role (of a ghost) that the star, transformed into a spectator of the spectacle that he has himself conjured, had auditioned a female fan (Deepika Padukone) to do. The film thus comes full circle, with the star not only becoming what the spectator wanted him to but also the bystander that the extra always was, while the ghost kills the villain. It is a happy ending.

In the next chapter, I will focus on the roles played by the star in mass films to further develop my argument on cinematic populism. What use does the mass film find for its star-protagonist, whose distinction and star status the spectator is never allowed to forget? To stay with *Om Shanti Om* just for one moment longer, why are there two Shah Rukh Khan characters in the film?

3

Rowdy-Citizen
He who knows his *Ganji* and *Benji*

My argument on populism in the cinema does not yet address the crucial issue of continuity between the domains of the cinematic and the political. The fact of the leakage between the two domains has been noted by a number of scholars, starting with Robert Hardgrave Jr. However, with the exception of M. Madhava Prasad, most accounts have tended to suggest that cinema 'influences' a credulous viewer into believing that the fictional is real. The viewer presumably carries over this belief into the political domain where she/he votes for film stars because of their screen personae. The entire explanatory model collapses if we do not assume that 'seeing is believing' (Das Gupta 1991) in a simplistic fashion.

Some political scientists including G. Rami Reddy (1989) propose a second explanatory model. In this model, one or another variant of caste and other interest group mechanization is all there is to the star-politician. Let me call this the 'interest group model' to distinguish it from the one founded on influence and credulity. In the interest group model, stardom is a plus point in electoral mobilization but not a substantial factor. This approach may be justified in the analysis of dozens of star-politicians across the country, who have indeed proved that the roles they played on the big or small screens are secondary and even inconsequential to their electoral campaigns, except as sources of glamour. However, I would like to make a distinction between stars, or any other category of celebrity, as an embellishment to a campaign, and another category of stars that emerges as the foundation for political formations and/or mobilizations. With Chiranjeevi's decision

to establish a political party, the nature of the linkage between the two domains has once again been brought into sharp focus, thereby reminding us that a study of contemporary Telugu cinema cannot but confront the problem rather directly.

In his 'Fan *Bhakti*' essay, M. Madhava Prasad opens up a new line of inquiry into the politics-cinema linkages by suggesting that the fan-star relationship is at once consequence and evidence of the foundational problems with citizenship and sovereignty in our context.

> The ideology of popular sovereignty has it that in modern democracies, the monarch is divested of the sovereignty vested in him, which is then fragmented and distributed equally among the people of the republic to constitute them as sovereign citizens. If we then assume that the Indian republic was constituted by wresting sovereignty from the Imperial power, the question is: did the people receive their rightful share of the spoils of independence? Even if we take into account the insight that the sovereignty of the modern state is a factor of international relations, and not the mirror image of the collective sovereignty of the people, we are still left with the question whether the interior has been subjected to a morphological overhaul—the constitution of new subjectivities, new modes of association, new contractual relations etc.—to bring it in line with the substantive idea of a republican polity.
>
> I think the answer to that question is no. Or at best some might prefer to say that the process is underway, that the revolution is in progress (2007).

Drawing on the work of Thomas Blom Hansen (2005), which suggests that multiple sovereignties are at work because pre-republican loyalties continue to exist even in the present, Prasad attempts to 'locate film stars within this field of fragmented sovereignties'. Prasad then goes on to argue that cinema is one of the sites where popular sovereignty is exercised, facilitating the production of stars who function as the 'kings of democracy', 'binding political passions' which were rendered objectless with the formation of the republic.

What can the student of cinema bring to the study of the south Indian star-politician? That, too, against the backdrop of the influence and interest group models, which between them account for the sum total of discussions on the political phenomenon in question. Let me begin by stating the obvious: stardom is universal and banal in that it is a feature of all film industries of the world. Cinemas have stars who work in similar ways. With Prasad, I propose the following: while all cinemas have stars, under specific historical and socio-political contexts, stars become the means of addressing/resolving a set of crucial social political questions. The mode of resolution in the fiction might offer

some insights into what the star might take with him to the domain of electoral politics as he migrates. I focus on Chiranjeevi's career in the 1980s and 1990s films to make my case.

The figure of the 'rowdy', a regular fixture in popular Telugu cinema from the 1980s, leads us directly to a higher level of abstraction in which we are face to face with the presence that stalks all modern political systems: the citizen-subject. The rowdy was also crucial for the evolution of a certain kind of film star whose very screen history and stature would limit the narrative possibilities available for star vehicles.

Citizen and Subject

Etienne Balibar (1992) notes the fundamental contradictions of the figure of the citizen in his essay 'Citizen-Subject'. According to Balibar, a critical shift took place after the Declaration of Rights and the French Revolution. The political subject, hitherto thought of as the *subjectus* or the individual subjected to the sovereignty of the prince, now began to be conceived of as a sovereign subject (*subjectum*). With the Declaration of Rights, a different conception of the citizen, which was no longer founded on privilege and was instead universal, was proposed. Simultaneously, there was a yoking together of freedom and equality. This was a wholly new development because in classical philosophy freedom was founded on superiority or distinction: the citizen was free because of his property. Now a question that did not have an empirically verifiable answer, could be asked of the citizen.

> Who is a citizen? (or: Who are citizens?). The answer is: The citizen is a man in enjoyment of all his 'natural' rights, completely realizing his individual humanity, a free man simply because he is equal to every other man. This answer (or this new question in the form of an answer) will also be stated, after the fact: *The citizen is the subject,* the citizen is always a *supposed subject* (legal subject, psychological subject, transcendental subject) (p. 45, original emphases).

Balibar notes that, almost from its very inception, the new citizen figure was actualized through the exclusion of various categories of the population. The predication of a universal, rights-bearing citizen was a *hyperbolic proposition* according to Balibar: '*the wording of the statement always exceeds the act of its enunciation* ... the import of the statement already goes beyond it (without our knowing where), as was immediately seen in the effort of inciting the liberation that it produced' (p. 52, original emphasis). The hyperbolic proposition thus laid the ground for political struggles for inclusion.

The citizen, then, is not only an abstraction but also a figure from the future. He is marked by his *indetermination*:

> The citizen properly speaking is *neither* the individual *nor* the collective, just as he is *neither* an exclusively public being *nor* a private being. Nevertheless, these distinctions are present in the concept of the citizen. It would not be correct to say that they are ignored or denied: it should rather be said that they are suspended, that is irreducible to fixed institutional boundaries which would pose the citizen on one side and a *noncitizen* on the other (p. 51, original emphasis).

It is important to begin with Balibar because since the 1990s, the discussion in the Indian context frequently returns us to the issues his essay raises. A key focus in the Indian context has been the problems posed by the actualization of the abstract citizen figure. The most influential formulation of the problems of citizenship in our context is no doubt Partha Chatterjee's argument on civil and political society (discussed below). I will however begin with two important contributions, which preceded Chatterjee's and arguably laid the ground for his famous political society argument.

Analysing late twentieth century events and mobilizations, Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Nirajnana (1996) point out how the agentive female citizen, the *woman-subject* (p. 260), came into being. In contemporary political mobilizations, they argue, women, who were hitherto excluded from the conceptualization of the category of the citizen, began to claim citizenship. This claim, too, ironically, was exclusionary in that it pitted the upper caste, middle class Hindu woman against the lower caste male. Furthermore, the authors argue, it was facilitated by rendering *invisible* the marking of the citizen figure (as upper caste and middle class). In the anti-Mandal agitation for example, 'The media's invocation of students, youth and people was marked by a strange consensus on usage—the terms were obviously unmarked, yet referred only to those who were upper caste and middle class' (1996: 238). The significance of the agitation was that, '[A]nti-Mandalites saw themselves as authentic bearers of secularism and egalitarianism. Equality, they argued, would be achieved by the transcendence or a repudiation of caste, community and gender identifications' (p. 238). Citizenship, far from being the universal condition of political subjects in modern societies, was a position of privilege that middle class women had to fight for. The movement of woman, as the subject of patriarchal authority, to the woman-subject (the agentive woman-subject who acted on behalf of the nation-state) was predicated on the invisibility of caste and class. The authors' central argument is about the political implications for

feminism of this development. Of immediate relevance for my argument is their discussion of the process by which the citizen figure emerges by *acquiring* a state of 'indetermination'.

Vivek Dhareshwar and R. Srivatsan (1996) point out that the actualization of the citizen-subject occurs with the splitting or *doubling* of the citizen and his other. Effectively, the citizen and subject, which were in any case tenuously linked together even in theory, came apart and became two distinct entities.

> If the political discourse of modernity created the ceremonies around the body of the citizen-subject, his rights and duties, his narratives of self-hood, it also effected a split, a doubling, between the legal-political-moral subject and the empirical subject of political technologies. The transmutation of the latter into the former, the world of subjection into the world of right, has been the 'unfinished' project of modernity (p. 219).

Partha Chatterjee's work (1997, 2000, and 2004), too, takes up the key problems with citizenship that animate the essays discussed above. In Chatterjee's work, the citizen and subject occupy distinct and autonomous domains. It is possible to see Chatterjee's formulation on political society as an extension of Dhareshwar and Srivatsan's notion of split between citizen and non-citizen and the geographical location of the citizen's double in a 'designated' space (the *basti*). The citizen-subject, which had already come apart into citizens and subjects, in reality and in theory, becomes, in Chatterjee's work, two entirely different kinds of political subjects, whose modes of political participation and concerns are so different that they have to be analysed separately. For Chatterjee, civil society is the domain of citizens, marked by their middle class status from the rest of the population. He states, 'I have favoured retaining the old idea of civil society as bourgeois society, in the sense used by Hegel and Marx, and of using it in the Indian context as an actually existing arena of institutions and practices inhabited by a relatively small section of the people whose social locations can be identified with a fair degree of clarity' (2004: 38). In theory, everybody is a member of civil society, but in reality this is far from being the case. To distinguish between 'classic associational forms of civil society' and the rest of the population, he proposes the category of political society.

Most of the inhabitants of India are only tenuously, and even then ambiguously and contextually, rights bearing citizens in the sense imagined by the constitution. They are not, therefore, proper members of civil society and are not regarded as such by the institutions of the state. But it is not as though

they are outside the reach of the state or even excluded from the domain of politics. As populations within the territorial jurisdiction of the state, they have to be both looked after and controlled by various governmental agencies. These activities bring these populations into a certain *political* relationship with the state (2004: 38).

With Chatterjee's notion of civil and political society, what we have is not just the coming apart of the citizen and subject into separate empirically verifiable entities, but also the surfacing of 'fixed institutional boundaries, which would pose the citizen, on one side, and a *non-citizen* on the other', which Balibar thought was precisely the problem that liberal political philosophy sought to avoid. Political society, as Chatterjee argues, is the domain of non-citizens, where the deferment of citizenship throws up distinct forms of mobilizations, which address the state as a provider of welfare.

Madhava Prasad (1998) points out, 'Although Citizen-Subject remains an incompletely realized utopic figure in all instances, it is also the case that this non-realization takes specific forms in different nation-state formations' (p. 54). The problem, therefore, is not merely the gap between the citizen-in-theory and the population at large—for there are no instances where such a gap does not exist—but the ways in which the 'non-realization' is sought to be addressed in various sites, including, of course, the cinema.

Stardom and Citizenship

The archetypal cinematic representation of this gap, which served as the model for Telgu films over the next four decades, has been *Malapilla* (Gudavalli Ramabrahmam 1938). This film revolves around the conflict between the Dalits and Brahmins of a village and its resolution by the intervention of the local Gandhian Chaudhurayya (Suri Babu). Both Dalit and Brahmin communities are represented in the film as 'backward' and being at fault. Their beliefs, practices, and actions cause tensions repeatedly. Further, their members are presented as being incapable of thinking beyond the interests of their respective castes. On the other hand, Chaudhurayya does not belong to either caste and with his fellow Gandhians frequently appears at the site of conflict to diffuse it. The character's mandate is to reform both communities. Reform, in turn, is imaged as the process by which these groups give up specific practices that are identified with each of these communities (animal sacrifice, meat eating, and alcohol consumption, on the one hand, and orthodoxy, on the other).

Malapilla allows us to see that even before the formation of the Republic, Indian cinemas had already begun to work out a solution for one of the biggest and most persistent problems with the conception of the citizen figure, in our context: what will become of caste and other particularities? Notice that Chaudhurayya, the citizen figure in this film, does not belong to either of the castes he seeks to reform. Indeed, although his name suggests that he is Kamma by caste, he is *casteless*, unlike the Brahmins and Dalits of the village that he is seen entering in the beginning of the film.

Malapilla also adopts a second mode of resolving the problem of particularity, thereby, offering an illustration of an important point made by Laura Mulvey (1990). The film, itself, does not name the transcendental state, achieved by this mode, as that of citizenship, but it is, nevertheless, an interesting indicator of the shape of screen citizens to come. A brief discussion of film theoretical issues related to stardom allows me to demonstrate the utility of *Malapilla* to the elaboration of a key feature of stardom.

In her 'Visual Pleasure' essay, Mulvey observes, '... the cinema has distinguished itself in the production of ego ideals as expressed, in particular, in the star system, the stars' centring both screen presence and screen story *as they act out a complex process of likeness and difference* (*the glamourous impersonates the ordinary*)' (1990: 32, emphasis added). Remaining outside Mulvey's psychoanalytical frame, it is still possible to extend her argument on stars in a new direction. Mulvey's essay throws up the question of the star's relationship to the narrative, which has often been resolved in film theory by making a distinction between narrative and spectacle. In order for this distinction to work, the narrative has to be understood as being limited to the business of plot development, while spectacle would constitute the suspension or the arresting of the story. Mulvey's notion of 'to-be-looked-at-ness' alerts us to how the (female) star becomes pure spectacle. However, the screen presence-screen story distinction, in spite of Mulvey's limited use for it, may be more than a pointer to the narrative-spectacle divide. David Bordwell rejects this division outright and says that the split between spectacle and narrative presupposes a very 'austere conception of the narrative', which among other things does not account for Hong Kong cinema that he has set about examining (2000: 178).

Richard Dyer's (1991 and 1994) more elaborate later formulation on the interplay between the star-as-image and star-as-real-person (the latter, itself, is understood as being an elaborately constructed fiction)

has clear parallels with Mulvey's. He can be read as elaborating on the 'complex processes' that Mulvey refers to. According to Dyer (1991), as pointed out in the previous chapter, the mobilization of 'facts' about the star needs to be read as being part of the attempt at the authentication of the star image, as a whole.

This argument on the star's *double existence*, about which I will have something to say below, reaches something of a high point in Miriam Hansen's (1991) work when she argues that diegesis and discourse are the two levels at which stars 'work'. The level of discourse in Hansen's conceptualization corresponds with Dyer's (1994) notion of the star's image. According to Hansen, the presence of a star in a film,

> undercuts the [narrative and scopic] regime's apparent primacy, unity, and closure. By activating a discourse external to the diegesis, the star's presence enhances a centrifugal tendency in the viewer's relation to the filmic text and thus runs counter to the general objective of concentrating meaning in the film as product and commodity (1991: 246).

The point comes through rather forcefully in her analysis of the Rudolf Valentino phenomenon. If all stars are thus capable of potentially arresting the narrative, then Hansen is indeed correct in suggesting that they are capable of jeopardizing the film's status as a commodity and industrial product. How, then, do we come to terms with the fact that all film industries in the world are critically dependent on stars? Hansen's line of argument would suggest that film industries, rather than profiting from stars, actually put their investments at great risk by deploying stars.

I suggest that the diegesis does not presume spectatorial innocence of stardom at all. Why else should industries invest in the manufacture of stars? A film is, therefore, not at the risk of falling apart when viewers recognize the players or become ecstatic when their favourites appear on screen. Furthermore, I do not wish to argue that the problem has to do with *Indian* stars, as Vijay Mishra (2002) has done. Notice, for example, Vijay Mishra's modest suggestion that it is the specificity of Indian cinema that necessitates an addition to the following five-point model for the analysis of stardom that he culls from the work of Richard Dyer (1994) and Ellis (1982):

i. the star's roles should be examined in regard to a culture's precursor text(s);
ii. through these manifold roles or narrative placements on screen a star gradually accumulates his or her own symbolic 'biography';

iii. the screen biography and the star's actual life intersect, often generating industry deals and occasional political placements;
iv. the star is a material phenomenon, a physical body with idiosyncratic or stereotypical voice, physiognomy, gestural repertoire, physical agility and costume;
v. the star is iconic whose public reception is manifest in shrines, calendar art, comics, T-shirts and so on (p. 127).

He then adds, 'To account for the Indian star, this model needs to be expanded. In particular, I will argue that song and dialogic situations constitute two overarching systems that lead to the memorial construction of the star in Bombay Cinema' (p. 127). Mishra, in his study of Amitabh Bachchan, goes on to propose that the actor (star really) needs to be seen as a 'parallel text': 'Amitabh Bachchan transcended that status of stardom to become a text in his own right' (p. 156). What he means is that the accounts of stardom that he came across do not quite explain someone like Bachchan. That Mishra's problem is with existing formulations rather than the concept/term stardom itself, becomes clear in his next sentence when he clarifies that the process he has in mind is one that 'goes beyond the construction of "stardom" as outlined by Dyer and Ellis' (p. 156). I would like to contend that at stake—in Mishra's analysis as in mine—is not just the comprehension of a particular phenomenon (Bachchan, Chiranjeevi, etc.), but also the critical-analytical conception of stardom itself.

Unlike Hansen, Dyer allows us to conceive of the discursive and diegetic levels working in tandem in a single film. He notes that a film works *with* audience foreknowledge:

> The star's image is used in the construction of a character in three different ways: The film may, through its deployment of character and the rhetoric of film, bring out certain features of the star's image and ignore others. In other words, from the structured polysemy of the star's image certain meanings are selected in accord with the overriding conception of the character in the film.
>
> This selective use of a star's image is problematic for a film, in that it cannot guarantee that the particular aspects of a star's image it selects will be those that interest the audience (1994: 142–3).

Dyer's comment helps locate the problem with Hansen's claim. However, his approach retains a rather simplistic distinction between a star's image and the character she/he plays in a particular film, as is evident from his elaboration of the three ways in which image is used to construct character. He cautions, 'a film must use the various signifying elements

of the cinema to foreground and minimize the image's traits appropriately' (p. 143). The clear cut and rather neat distinction between image and character is surprising, considering that Dyer's understanding of the former, is one which is inclusive of the kind of characters she/he plays. Given the complexity of Dyer's own conception of stardom, it would also seem naïve to assume that 'characters' in the cinema can be spoken of without reference to what stars bring to them. After all, in cinema a character does not pre-exist the star's performance of it.

I will try to offer a different explanation of how stars might be put to work in the rest of this chapter. I will begin by examining *Malapilla*'s use of the star Kanchanamala, who was cast to play the lead role of Sampalata, a Dalit girl (or *malapilla*). What did the casting of Kanchanamala achieve? Alerting us to precisely this aspect, the noted essayist and occasional scriptwriter Kodavatiganti Kutumba Rao stated, in an essay written many years after the film was released: 'There is no caste on the cinema screen … no "malapilla" [Dalit girl] in *Malapilla*—there is only Kanchanamala' (2000: 240). Although Kodavatiganti sees it in wholly negative terms, his comment is useful because it begs the question of how this state of castelessness came about on the silver screen. His objection to *Malapilla* is that the casting of Kanchanamala effectively blocks the realist aesthetic, which he suggests is, in any case, undermined by the fact that the character sings classical ragas and does other things that actual Dalits were supposedly incapable of. The heroine, and, to a much lesser extent her sister, are thus endowed with abilities that distinguish them from the rest of the Dalit community in the film. The film would have been a total failure if a Dalit played the role, he adds (p. 240). What makes Kanchanamala's presence so critical?

I will return to the question via the citizen figure. Tharu and Nirajnana's observation about the invisible marking of the citizen (as Hindu, upper caste, etc.) becomes clearer with Dhareshwar and Srivatsan's point about the prerequisites of citizenship:

> One such prerequisite is obviously class. The point we are making, however, involves much more than merely noting that a certain class position [or caste or community] allows/prevents people from occupying the slot or subject-position of citizenship. If one of the major conditions of democratization is a certain *disincorporation of the subject's positivity*—my particularity has no bearing on my participation in the public sphere—not everyone can participate equally in the logic of disincorporation.
>
> The empowering promised by the logic of disincorporation—I speak, act as a citizen—has involved in India the deployment of discursive and institutional

strategies that have distributed the privilege of disincorporation in a highly uneven and unequal way; in such a way indeed that *some bodies… will not disincorporate*, so tied are their shameful positivity to their bodies (pp. 222–3, emphases added).

Reading the two essays together, it is possible to suggest that the peculiar logic of disincorporation produces the invisibly marked citizen figure, on the one hand and the non-citizen who is excessively marked by his/her particularity, on the other. In the case of *Malapilla* Chaudhurayya approximates to the first while both Dalits and Brahmins of the film are examples of the second kind of subject. But there is a third kind of body, which too, Dhareshwar and Srivatsan argue, is an effect of the same logic of disincorporation that produces the first two:

> [T]he fact that some bodies can reincorporate in the public sphere precisely as fantasmatic embodiments or icons of power—for example, cine-star and politicians (think of the significance of giant cut-outs)—far from disproving the logic of disincorporation proves to be one of its effects (p. 223).

They offer no further explanation of the fantasmatic figure. The authors also make the avoidable suggestion that somehow the size of the cut-out is evidence of the citizen-making process/logic. I will leave the politician out of the present discussion and suggest that if the film star indeed has a role in enhancing our understanding the logics of disincorporation, it is to the cinema that we have to turn to understand what s/he does for untangling the riddles of citizenship in our context.

Returning to the inconclusive discussion of *Malapilla*, the first mode of resolution of the problem of caste is hinged on the Chaudhurayya character and worked out at the story level. The second is premised on spectatorial recognition of the star Kanchanamala and this mode is only incidentally related to story level detail, although character's actions might further underscore her distinction vis-à-vis the rest of her community. As Kodavatiganti helps us note, when 'the glamorous impersonates the ordinary' it has political consequences: it evacuates the Dalit girl from a film about a Dalit girl. I note in passing that Kodavatiganti's argument is actually made in hindsight: Kanchanamala was not yet the major star she went on to become in the next few years. However, the film uses a variety of standard techniques, including soft focus close-ups, to highlight her 'to-be-looked-at-ness' so that *visually* too her distinction is foregrounded. Looking back at Kodavatiganti's essay, its significance lies in pinpointing the moment of Telugu cinema's discovery of the still extant political use for its stars: the *transcendence*

of particularity. *Malapilla* is an example of how the hypervisuality of the film star—the spectacular positivity of Kanchanamala—cancels the particularity of the Dalit she plays. There is thus no malapilla in *Malapilla*.

In the section below, I discuss Chiranjeevi's films, focusing on how they address the knotty problems of citizenship. Chiranjeevi's career assumes importance not only due to his emerging as a second generation star-politician but also what it might tell us about the context that produced him. Arguments about the watershed status of the late 1980s and 1990s—crucially important for Chiranjeevi's rise as a hero of the masses—are familiar enough. From Atul Kohli's characterization of the period as one which posed a 'governability crisis' (1990) to the Indian state, to Tejaswini Niranjana's description of the period as the 'post-national-modern' (2000), we are repeatedly confronted with formulations alerting us to fundamental shifts in politics, which are not accounted for by disingenuous observations on the rise of the Hindu right and the decline of Congress. Also familiar in this regard are more recent assertions on 'India's deepening democracy' which is said to be evidenced in the increased participation of lower castes and other underprivileged populations in elections, the rising influence of backward caste and Dalit politicians, etc.[1]

With specific reference to Andhra Pradesh, what is being referred to as the 'second democratic upsurge' (Yadav 2000) is, in fact, the consequences of post-emergency political mobilizations by various constituencies of *non-citizens*. This period more or less coincides with Chiranjeevi's screen career. An important feature of this period is that the polity *appears* to disintegrate into infinite mobilizable constituencies. Notice, for example, the proliferation of organizations mobilizing Dalit, backward caste, and tribal communities in this period. In the past decade, virtually every caste and tribal group acquired its own organization and charter of demands and mobilized their members in a series of mammoth meetings (often termed *garjana* or roar). It would be politically correct but not entirely accurate to conceive of this political ferment as the struggle for *citizenship*. For, such a conception betrays a rather literal reading of the 'hyperbolic proposition' and the assumption that a movement from subject-hood to citizenship is only a matter of time and some organization.

Valuable insights into how contemporary political mobilizations grapple with the impossibility of citizenship were provided in the months prior to the official announcement of Chiranjeevi's decision to form a

political party. OBC and Dalit groups met speculations of his political entry with great enthusiasm. There were even rumours that Chiranjeevi would join the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and be the party's Chief Ministerial candidate.[2] The big question in the days before Chiranjeevi made the official announcement was whether or not he was 'everybody's man' (a reference to the title of his film *Andarivadu*).[3] The call by OBC and Dalit groups to Chiranjeevi, a member of the upper caste Kapu community, to lead them, as well as other speculations revolving around his emergence as the leader of the lower castes in the state, is evidence of a continuity of the cinematic construct of '*andarivadu*' into the domain of politics and popular journalism alike.

Chiranjeevi himself invoked this figure during his public meeting at Tirupathi (26 August 2008) when he took on his critics who he said were asking what the star, who lived a life of luxury, could possibly know about common people's problems. At some length he recalled his humble origins, but went to add, obviously by way of demonstrating his qualifications to lead the masses: 'I know about *ganji* [rice gruel, associated with abject poverty] and also about *Benji* [Mercedes Benz]'.[4]

I outline below how this transcendental figure, the everybody's man who knows his ganji and Benji, was produced on screen. A key factor in the production of this figure is the acute spectatorial awareness of his distinction, not the forgetting of his particularity (as a member of a caste group, etc.).

I propose that the continuity between his screen and political career is not at the level of the belief in Chiranjeevi's goodness by people who cannot tell between the politician and his screen roles. Films gesture towards a possible *model for the politics of non-citizenship*. The model is founded on the recognition of inequality and the gap between citizens and subjects, and also leaves little doubt that the cinema and its stars have a great deal to say about the politics of our time.

Staying with the mass film, we know by now that one of the characteristics of the genre is that its star-protagonist plays the role of a lower class-caste figure. Often the protagonist is also a criminal or is falsely accused of a crime. Chiranjeevi repeatedly played the role of the rowdy (the English word is used in Telugu as well) in the 1980s and early 1990s.[5] So the mass film's stars, around whom there was an explosion of fans' associations in the 1980s, were, among other things, screen rowdies.

In a number of Chiranjeevi mass films till *Hitler* (1997), the star either plays the role of a rowdy or acts like one (that is tries to pass as one), briefly.

Figs 31, 32: Publicity stills; from *Rowdy Alludu* (September 1991 issue, Chiranjeevi is seen with famous screen vamp 'Disco' Shanti) and *Mutha Mestri* (August 1992 issue).
Source: AA.

Post *Hitler,* there are nostalgic references to the star's past roles as a rowdy (like for instance, an 'item song' in *Annaiah* and the role of old man in *Andarivadu*). The manifestations of the rowdy range from the urban petty crook who resembles the '*tapori*' of the 1990s Bombay cinema,[6] on the one hand, to the vigilante gangster of the Bachchan vintage (especially *Don*). Examples of the first kind of screen rowdy played by Chiranjeevi include *Donga Mogudu* (1987), *Jebudonga* (1987), and *Rowdy Alludu* (K. Raghavendra Rao 1991). The latter kind of rowdy is to be found in *State Rowdy* (1989). In a large number of films, the protagonist is neither a criminal nor falsely accused of crime, but is, nevertheless, a loud and vulgar lower class figure, whose rowdy behaviour is the source of much comedy (*Gharana Mogudu*, *Mutha Mestri*, *Alluda Majaka*, and *Andarivadu*).

One of the interesting aspects of Chiranjeevi's rowdy roles is that they are founded on the *enhanced authenticity of the subaltern* in his vehicles. This is worked out at the story level where it is often the case that the character has no feudal past to reclaim. Dark complexion, speech in lower class dialect laced with incorrect English words, and a certain

macho or aggressive body language are all factors that contributed to a lasting screen stereotype of the rowdy who reappears in film after film. I pointed out in the previous chapter, such a painstakingly authenticated subaltern is coeval with the increased use of the biographical reference, which foregrounds the extra-ordinariness of the protagonist even as it ensures the recollection of the star status of the actor. Obviously, something more than fooling the spectator into believing that the character is actually a subaltern is being effected. As with *Malapilla*, in the mass film, too, ordinariness (of character) and distinction (of star) are intertwined. The rowdy's authenticity lies in what the star brings to the role.

The surfacing of the rowdy in the mass film, as the centre of the narrative, corresponds with the growth of the discourse of lumpenization/criminalization of politics. Dhareshwar and Srivatsan make an interesting observation, which I quote below to underscore the obvious political significance of the rise of the rowdy in popular discourse:

> The figure of the 'rowdy' acquires semantic and ideological elasticity in the imaginary of the middle-class by becoming the focus of their anxiety about what they see as the 'criminalization' of politics ('*goondaraj*') and its threat to their precarious class-privilege. This very ideological social description then feeds into the everyday discourse of the ideologues of the middle-class, from Left to Left-liberal, to liberal-Right, who invoke 'lumpenization of politics' as an explanation of all that they find disturbing in the social and political life of the nation (1996: 203).

The mass film's rowdy addresses these very anxieties by becoming the means by which the unbridgeable gap of the citizen and non-citizen is sutured. I will dwell on this crucial political task performed by the star by examining the cinematic techniques that produce the screen rowdy.

Double Existence of the Star

I would first like to explain what I mean by the double existence of the star and later move on to the obvious manifestation of this essential feature of stardom as the casting of stars in double roles in the fiction. Analyses of the double in the Indian context have tended to focus on the fictional level. For example, Lalitha Gopalan discusses the significance of the double in the course of her analysis of Vijayashanti's films, 'Indian cinema has long been fascinated with double and triple roles, and utilizes them both to recognise and bank on a star's popularity' (Gopalan 2003: 54). She also mentions the standard feature of films featuring a star in double roles: siblings separated at birth grow up

into mirror opposites of each other and find the parents, etc. I will add to Gopalan's observation by suggesting that doubling does not merely occur at the level of multiple roles of the star, but is far more foundational to stardom.

Mulvey's distinction between screen presence and screen story and Dyer's discussion of the simultaneous existence of the real and reel images of the star are pointers to the complex interplay between the here and now of the film and spectatorial memory. The double existence of the star manifests itself as the gap between the character and actor. We can see from the history of Telugu cinema that this distance is one of the key facilitators of the cinema's engagement with the aporias of citizenship (for example, *Malapilla*). The heart of the matter, as far as the usefulness of stars is concerned, is *the cinematic production of two subject positions, distinct social/spatial domains that correspond to these, and having the star occupy both these positions simultaneously*. The consequence is the rowdy-citizen—a composite entity that is the authentic subaltern and the super-citizen.

The general principal is as follows: double existence of the star, as a biographical person and a character on the screen, is something that the mass film foregrounds with its frequent deployment of the biographical reference. Spectatorial awareness of this doubling is critical because what is at issue is not merely the mixing of biographical detail into fiction, but also the production of two subject positions roughly corresponding with the citizens and subjects of the real world. In order for these two distinct subject positions to be created, the mass film invokes the star-as-a-real-person, even as it offers him as the rowdy in the fiction. The star thus invoked helps resolve the foundational contradiction of citizenship that results in the eternal doubling of the citizen figure (into the rowdy, for example) by straddling between the contradictory positions simultaneously. The star is at once the rowdy and 'real' person marked by his distinction. While we know we are watching a film, we are also invested in the story. So, at the story level too the star-protagonist has to be seen straddling across contradictory subject positions, rendering insignificant the unbridgeable gap and antagonism between them.

I will briefly compare two films deploying stars in roles that correspond to distinct subject positions in order to show what the mass film's rowdy tells us about doubling. An early instance, if not the first in Telugu, of the star's roles within a film approximating different subject positions, can be found in *Iddaru Mitrulu* (Adurthi Subba Rao 1961). According

to Prabhu (1993), this was the very first Telugu film to have cast a major star in a double role and was based on the Bengali film *Taser Ghar* (Mangal Chakraborthy 1957). There can be little doubt that *Iddaru Mitrulu* has made a lasting contribution to Indian cinema. Within years of this film, NTR was cast in a double role in *Ramudu Bheemudu* (Tapi Chanakya 1964), extending the narrative possibilities opened up by *Iddaru Mitrulu* and also introducing these to Hind cinema, when the NTR vehicle was remade as *Ram Aur Shyam* (Tapi Chanakya 1967). D.V. Narasaraju, the scriptwriter for *Ramudu Bheemudu* provides a fascinating account of the film script's long career (Narasaraju 2006). He claims that his script was ready a good five years before the film itself was made. ANR had, in fact, heard the story and was interested. Narasaraju adds that *Ramudu Bheemudu* was remade in Tamil (*Enga Veetu Pillai*, Tapi Chanakya, 1965, featuring MGR), Malayalam, and Oriya. He also draws attention to several important developments in the history of the double role in the Indian context (pp. 39–56). One interesting observation he makes is that MGR had already acted in a double role in *Nadodi Mannan* (MGR 1958), but his (Narasaraju's) own effort was to script a *social* film, and not a folklore film like MGR's vehicle, in which a major star would play a double role. He consciously scripted a film in which the star would play characters that were both good, unlike the typical double (of Jeckyll and Hyde vintage, perhaps). He recalls two Hollywood versions of *Prisoner of Zenda*, which featured stars in double roles and states that *Nadodi Mannan* was modelled on them (p. 48). From Narasaraju's account, it becomes clear that the double we are dealing with, is not the alter ego.

In *Iddaru Mitrulu,* Akkineni Nageswara Rao plays a rich man and also a poor mechanic. They meet each other when the rich man rescues his double from an attempted suicide. When the latter attributes his woes to his poverty, the rich man offers to change places in order to demonstrate to him that being rich is not the same as being happy. The film ends with the mechanic being disabused of his illusions and the rich man discovering the joys of a parental home. In this film, it is the rich man who is the narrative pivot and also the one who is better equipped to inhabit the space of the other. He is also seen outperforming his counterpart in his domain.

Chiranjeevi's *Donga Mogudu* revisits *Iddaru Mitrulu* with one critical difference. It adopts *Ramudu Bheemudu*'s revision of *distributing disability*: the rich character is weak and effeminate while the poor one is macho and clever. In *Donga Mogudu*, the rowdy Nagaraju (Chiranjeevi), is the

double of the industrialist Ravi Teja (also Chiranjeevi). His domineering wife, as well as the villains, plague the latter. Nagaraju is the leader of a small band of petty crooks. The rowdy saves the industrialist from thugs hired by the villains. Ravi Teja hires Nagaraju to impersonate him while he goes on a vacation with his secretary Priyamvada (Bhanupriya). However, he is framed in the 'murder' of his secretary and upon his return gives away his property to the villains who blackmail him. Unable to bear the humiliation from his wife, Lalita (Madhavi), and her mother (Raja Sulochana), he attempts suicide. Nagaraju rescues him for the second time. Hearing the story of his life, Nagaraju decides that they should exchange roles. He now enters Teja's life, drives away the villains and tames Lalita (by slapping her). Nagaraju thus restores Ravi Teja's wealth for him but also cleans up the degenerate public and private spheres that the latter inhabits.

An interesting variant of the star in double roles is to be found in Chiranjeevi's *Yamudiki Mogudu*. The film is also evidence of generic variation that was possible against the template of the mass film. In an obvious gesture towards NTR's *Yama Gola*, the Chiranjeevi character in this film finds himself in Yamalokam due to a mistake made by Chitragupta. Satyanarayana and Allu Ramalingaiah play Yama and Chitragupta respectively. They had played those roles in the NTR hit. The character discovers Chitragupta's mistake and demands his life back. However, his body has been destroyed so he can only enter the body of someone who is going to die soon. There is a fascinating sequence in which the hero is shown various potential bodies that he can have because they are going to die soon. What he is shown is actually *sequences from Chiranjeevi's earlier films* and the reasons for which the characters are found unfit, have to do with the plot of those films. These reasons are of course familiar to the knowing spectator, who is aware of the screen history of the star but have to be revealed by another character to the hero.

The question posed by the predicament of the dead hero, literally disincorporated is: which body, or rather *subject position*, is most suitable for him, but also what role the star, who is gradually becoming a specialist in rowdy roles, should play. The most suitable body is that of a timid scion of a wealthy feudal family, doomed to die of poisoning by his evil uncle. This story, into which the spirit/Chiranjeevi will now enter, is nothing less than a different *genre* from the one that the other character hitherto inhabited. The star now migrates across subject positions, personality types (the virile street-smart, urban rowdy of the

first life to the wealthy village idiot of the second), and across genres. The hero then goes about solving the problems related to both his lives, punishing both sets of his killers. One problem however remains: at the very end of film he is left with two heroines and is unable to make a choice between them.[7]

Returning to the rowdy proper, he is an embodiment of excess. In *Donga Mogudu* and *Yamudiki Mogudu*, much hilarity results from the sudden discovery of his excesses by various characters, who are unaware of the role-playing. I will elaborate on this figure's excesses below. Of relevance to my discussion is Dhareshwar and Srivatsan's point about the excess of identity that bodies, failing to disincorporate, are condemned to carry. In the mass film, the screen rowdy's excess is almost *never* identity in the conventional sense. Specific caste origins, for example, are neither attributed to this figure nor is it necessary to do so. The obvious obscenity of his body is adequate evidence of his disqualification from citizenship.

At the level of the fiction, the rowdy is invariably presented as excessively masculine. His masculinity, as in *Donga Mogudu*, is attributed to his occupation as petty crook, industrial worker, motor mechanic, gangster, etc. in other films. Aggression and physical strength are attributes of his lower class masculinity, which in turn is critical for resolving a slew of story level problems. Chronologically speaking, from *Donga Mogudu*, the rowdy character played by Chiranjeevi confronts another excessive figure—the aggressive upper class woman, whose power, snobbishness, and *agency* are seen as being a major part of the problem with the fictional universe that the hero is called upon to solve. The rowdy's masculinity finds yet another counterpart in the mass film: the surplus heroine, who is also lower class like the rowdy, but loses him to the aggressive upper class heroine. This triad—the rowdy, the shrew, and the lower class female friend/lover of the rowdy—is the pivot around which the late 1980s and early 1990s mass film revolves.

The most important characteristic of the rowdy is his *propensity for enjoyment*, which ensures that spectatorial investment in the figure is suitably rewarded by his pursuit of pleasure. The rowdy is a hard drinking voracious eater who is often seen chasing vamps and flirting scandalously with his mother-in-law on occasion.

The politics of the mass film revolves around the rowdy's excesses. How the rowdy become the means of resolving the crises in the fiction and the politics of citizenship that animate the mass film needs to be discussed in some detail.

Doubling and Disavowal

In order for any film to work, it is necessary that the spectator disavow her knowledge that she is only watching a film. The investment in the fiction—the willingness to be fooled by it—coexists with the acute awareness that it is, after all, only fiction. This state of awareness and its denial, *disavowal* in film theory, finds interesting story level illustrations in the mass film. A brief explanation of the concept of disavowal is in order, at this stage. Disavowal is a concept that film theory borrows from Freudian psychoanalysis. As Christian Metz (1982) explains, when the child is confronted with evidence provided by the senses that all human beings do not have penis, it

> … will from then on forever hold two contradictory opinions (proof that in spite of everything the real perception has not been without effect): 'All human beings are endowed with a penis' (primal belief) and 'Some human beings do not have a penis' (evidence of the senses). In other words, it will, perhaps definitively, retain its former belief *beneath* the new one, but it will also hold to its new perceptual observation while *disavowing* it on another level (= denial of perception, disavowal, Freud's *Verleugnung*). Thus is established the lasting matrix, the effective prototype of all the splittings of belief which man will henceforth be capable of in the most varied domains, of all the infinitely complex unconscious and occasionally conscious interactions which he will allow himself between 'believing' and 'non-believing' and which will on more than one occasion be of great assistance to him in resolving (or denying) delicate problems (p. 70, original emphases).

With specific reference to the cinema, Christian Metz goes on to elaborate thus: 'I shall say that behind any fiction there is a second fiction: the diegetic events are fictional, that is the first; but everyone pretends to believe that they are true, and that is the second; there is even a third: the general refusal to admit that somewhere in oneself one believes they are genuinely true' (1982: 72).

I will discuss a few examples to show how disavowal works in the mass film.

In *State Rowdy,* the hero who is introduced as the rowdy Kalicharan (Chiranjeevi) later turns out to be Prithviraj, a police informer. A flashback informs the spectator that he is deeply moved by the plight of the local Superintendent of Police, Nagamani (Sarada), whose husband is murdered by the gang of Bhoopati (Rao Gopal Rao). He willingly transforms himself into a rowdy in order to infiltrate Bhoopati's gang. When the villains find out that Kalicharan/Prithviraj is an informer, he

is absorbed into the police department as a sub-inspector. He then goes on to destroy Bhoopati's gang. There is therefore a remarkable story level disavowal of the hero's rowdy-hood. The rowdy we meet when the film begins is not a rowdy at all. But that is not all. This impossibility of rowdy-hood is also a problem of verisimilitude, because when such major stars play thieves and crooks there is a real danger of the fiction lacking in credibility. This finds a resonance at the level of the fiction in the movement of the hero from being a rowdy, to being a policeman.

Disavowal at the story level becomes a means of denying the rowdy's positivity. What remains, in spite of the denial of the hero's subalternity, is the gap between subject positions and the hero's ability to move from one to the other. The mass film's story, let me therefore suggest, is not merely woven around populist themes/concerns but is a *pretext for staging such subject-citizen movements* and is in the service of facilitating this.

This throws up an interesting question: if the very subalternity of our hero is premised on disavowal (now you believe it, now you do not), what do we make of the rowdy's excesses, in particular his enjoyment?

Gharana Mogudu, is useful to understand the mass film's politics of enjoyment, centred on its lower class protagonist. This film, among the most successful Chiranjeevi starrers ever made, is based on the Rajnikant hit, titled, *Mannan* (P. Vasu 1991) and demonstrates yet again the convergence between the careers of these stars.[8] *Gharana Mogudu* introduces the hero in a sequence that is completely unrelated to the rest of the film. I mentioned this in my discussion of opening sequences of the mass film in the previous chapter. The sequence, revolving round an 'item song' featuring the famous cabaret dance specialist 'Disco' Shanti, primarily underscores the protagonist's propensity for enjoyment. In this film, the hero's enjoyment not only involves the participation of others—such as the group of his friends who dance with him in the opening sequence—but it is also staged/performed for the benefit of a collective. The hero not only solves various problems of the workers but also provides *them* pleasure. This fusion of politics and pleasure, indeed the staging of one as the other, requires close attention.

In *Gharana Mogudu,* the working class hero is also produced as a lower caste figure (being fatherless and barely educated). Here the problems of class oppression and caste discrimination are seen to stem from the upper class/caste industrialist-heroine, Uma Devi (Nagma). The film opens with a sequence highlighting her managerial abilities, power, and arrogance. The unemployed dockyard worker Raja (Chiranjeevi), enters

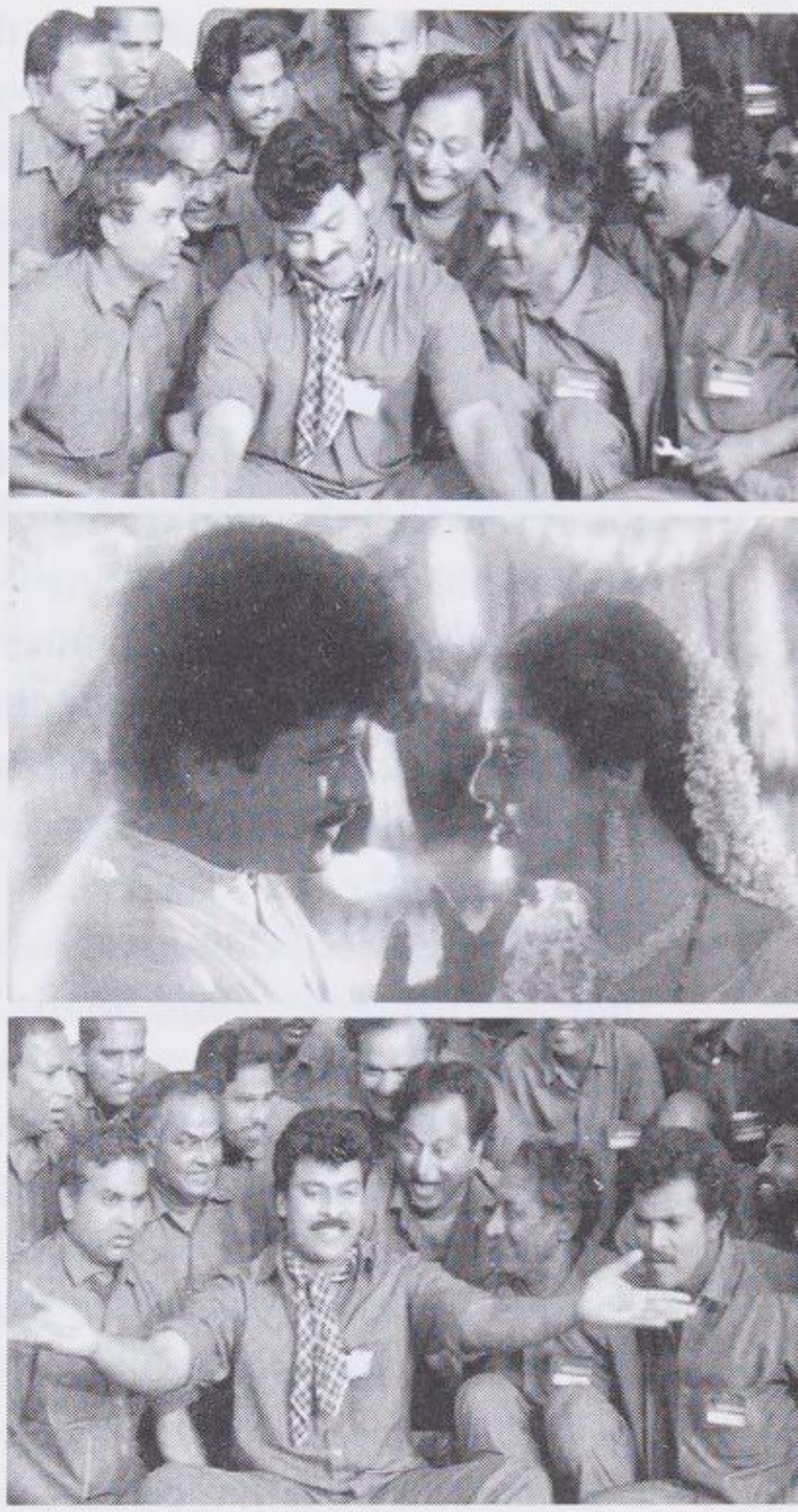
her space when he gets a job in her factory by saving her father (Rao Gopal Rao) from the villain's hirelings. The heroine is not only presented as anti-worker but also, in what is meant to be read as a sign of deep rooted, though displaced casteism, treats the workers as untouchables, translating casteism into class terms. When Uma Devi learns that Raju had rushed an injured worker to the hospital in her car, she douses the car in petrol and burns it, suggesting that it has been polluted. The theme of untouchability is reintroduced when Uma Devi marries Raju, who has, by this time, become the leader of the workers' union. It turns out that her sole intention in plotting the marriage was humiliating him. Soon after the wedding, she tells Raju that she will not consummate marriage because he is, after all, a worker, an untouchable of sorts. Instead, she tells him, he will be treated as her domestic servant.

By converting the caste/class struggle into a domestic quarrel, the film shifts the contest from the public to the private domain. At the textual level, the working class/caste hero's struggle is subsumed and even legitimized because it is interlinked with the taming of the independent career woman. The class-caste conflict is displaced on to the contest between the worker's masculinity, undermined by a domestic crisis, and a femininity gone awry. The class conflict is resolved when the heroine finally falls in love with her husband, regaining her femininity. She then decides to give away her factory to the workers.[9]

I will focus on how the hero's enjoyment dovetails into an engagement with the double (class-gender) political crisis around which the film revolves. As is the case with a number of other mass films around this time, the macho lower class hero is a figure of excessive enjoyment. Interestingly, it is not his own enjoyment that is at issue so much as the manner in which he becomes the object, or facilitator, of other character's erotic fantasies. Remarkably enough, these fantasies are at times triggered-off by nothing more than his mere physical presence. Take for instance the surplus heroine (Vani Vishwanath), who is the secretary to Uma Devi. A minor accident in a rickshaw she shares with Raju, is the occasion for her erotic fantasy about him. Later in the film, Uma Devi watches a video of Raju inaugurating a water tap at the workers' colony and imagines/fantasizes that he is having an affair with her secretary.

These fantasies, too, are a form of disavowal—of the banality of the actual. And the agent of pleasure, for both the characters in the fiction as well as the spectator, is the male star. The complex link between disavowal and sexually charged fantasies is revealed in a sequence

that occurs immediately after the interval. Just before the interval the hero, waiting eagerly to consummate his marriage (on the 'first night'), is told by his wife that she plotted the marriage only to humiliate him. Raju in turn challenges his wife that he will win the battle on the domestic front, too. After the interval, we see Raju back in the factory. His friends are curious about his first night with the boss. Raju narrates his 'experience' to the group, which now surrounds him. The narration ends in a song that is, in fact, the collective fantasy of Raju as well as his colleagues, triggered off by a wholly fabricated story. The fantasy has obvious political dimensions: the representative of the male workers is in bed, as if on their behalf, with the oppressive female boss.



The Collective Fantasy: Raju narrates his 'exper
to his co-workers. An erotic song follows.
Source: New Volga Videos.

I will briefly recall here the discussion of the biographical reference. Its incidence grew even as a concerted effort was made to produce the rowdy in terms that were far more realistic than ever before. Does the biographical reference then disturb the fantasy, forcing an acknowledgement of the actual and therefore rupturing the fictional? Disavowal is not forgetting, but is a qualitatively different spectatorial response. In the mass film, disavowal is premised on acute awareness of the presence of the star in the fiction, not amnesia.

The issue at hand is aptly foregrounded in a comment attributed to the famous Telugu producer Chakrapani, who, along with B. Nagi Reddi, ran Vijaya Studios and played a key role in shaping NTR's career. Actor Gummadi Venkateswara Rao (1997), recalls this producer's conversation with the young NTR, who was made up as an old man to play Bheeshma in the eponymous film. Chakrapani asked NTR about the response to the film and was told by the star, obviously

pleased with himself, that till the very end, viewers were unable to recognize him. The producer reportedly asked, 'If you were not going to be recognized, what was the need for you to play the role?' (p. 60). In Chakrapani's scheme of things, a star who could not be recognized, was a star wasted.

Returning to Chiranjeevi, it is not by fooling the spectator into forgetting about his presence that the star earns his keep, but by ensuring the contrary: endowing the character with such an excess of particularity that the rowdy is, at all times, the Megastar. Raju is representing the workers' interests in the fiction because he is not one of them, he is the facilitator of collective enjoyment in the fiction. Chiranjeevi, the star, is also an agent of spectatorial fantasy. Class-gender politics, mediated by the star who straddles the otherwise unbridgeable gap between subject positions, is transformed into the acting out of enjoyment: workers' and spectator's alike.

A discussion of the mass film's politics cannot be complete without the examination of *Mutha Mestri*. Not only is the film far more politically explicit than any other mass-film featuring Chiranjeevi, but its release triggered-off the very first round of speculation about the star's possible entry into politics.[10] The film was made a decade after *Khaidi*, by the same director.

Here the lower class-caste hero enters politics, becomes a minister, and cleanses the establishment of corrupt politicians. Arguably, popular Telugu cinema's most sympathetic response to backward caste and Dalit mobilization in the post-Mandal period, the film casts Chiranjeevi as the gangsman, in a vegetable market, whose name is Subash Chandra Bose. *Andarivadu*, fondly recalls this role by casting Chiranjeevi as a middle-aged gangsman of construction labourers. The market community, protected by Bose from thugs and corrupt police officials alike, is threatened with eviction when the city's mayor, in league with some politicians and the villain Atma Ram (Sharat Saxena), decides to sell the market yard to real estate developers. The film's story begins when Atma Ram's men burn the market. In a protest organized by the community, Bose, badly beaten up by the police, comes to the notice of the honest Chief Minister (Gummadi Venkateswara Rao). Owing to the intervention of the pro-poor local MLA, Sundaraiah (Somayajulu),[11] the Chief Minister withdraws the eviction order. Bose is nominated as the ruling party's candidate in the by-election when Atma Ram's men murder Sundaraiah. The hero is initially reluctant despite being pressurized by his beloved Buchamma (Meena) and others. He enters

the fray only after Atma Ram's men attempt to intimidate him. The affront to his fearlessness forces him to contest. Upon winning the by-election, he is made a minister. A true friend of the poor, he distributes title deeds to the landless, leads commandos against Atma Ram's men (who, in addition to being smugglers, harass the local fishing community), and on one occasion 'inaugurates' an old friend's new cow in front of the state's legislative assembly.[12] He, however, resigns from the ministry to avenge the suicide of his sister who was framed in a prostitution case by Atma Ram's men. After killing Atma Ram and his criminal son, Bose returns to the market yard. He refuses to return to politics even after the ruling party elects him as the Chief Minister in absentia. The film ends with Bose saying that he will return to politics, when needed, as the 'mutha mestri' (literally gangsman but in this context, leader, and protector) of seven crore Telugus, not just seven hundred porters (of the market).

Mutha Mestri, offers valuable insights into the kind of textual resolutions the mass film offers to social and political problems. I would like to distinguish between what may be called a *literal reading* of the film and a *second order reading* that allows us to note not only the linkages but also the discontinuities between the literal ('this is what actually happens in the film and its ideological implications are …') and over-determination of the literal by enjoyment and affect.

The literal reading of this film would suggest that the movement of the hero, in and out of politics, implies an explicit rejection of politics as a possible career for the true representative of the working class. Bose's resignation also has him being transformed from a man of the people to a revenge-seeking vigilante who is motivated by the suicide of his sister. His task, it would seem, is ridding the body politic of its bad elements and returning political leadership to good politicians like the Chief Minister. The second order reading suggests that the film overlays its conservative political resolution with another set of questions thrown open by the film's central crisis, which is caused by the death of the Gandhian citizen figure Sundaraiah, eliminated by a criminalized professional political class. The movement of the star-protagonist across the subject positions, of the political subject and its representative, is necessitated by the murder of Sundaraiah. A key issue in the film is the necessity to find the replacement for the dead Gandhian. At the time of Sundaraiah's murder, the masses already have their own leader, Bose, but he operates in the domain that is outside formal electoral politics.

What necessitates another reading of the film is the interregnum, when the hero briefly makes an appearance in parliamentary politics, causing considerable anxieties to some of the inhabitants of this domain. An examination of this interregnum suggests that a problem the film addresses is the what and how of *representation*, not merely who should be in political power.

What does Bose carry over or transfer from the market to the corrupt domain of electoral politics? At the very outset, Bose carries his excessive particularity, writ large on his obscene body. The film's surplus heroine acts as a foil to this aspect of Bose's character. Unlike *Gharana Mogudu* and *Rickshawvodu* later, the surplus heroine (that is, the heroine who does not get the hero) is the upper caste woman, who is also not anything like the aggressive rich woman who is tamed by the hero in the other mass films. The hero's 'choice' of the lower class Buchamma is one of the departures from the genre, as it was evolving in the early 1990s. The surplus heroine Kalpana (Roja), Bose's private secretary during his tenure as minister, serves an important function. She relays the upper caste, middle class anxieties of the lustful gaze of the lower class/caste male other.

Being Bose's private secretary, she often finds herself in close physical proximity to him. Kalpana is both attracted by the macho good-natured hero but also terrified of him because Yesu (Bose's sidekick played by Brahmanandam) tells her that Bose becomes a sex-maniac after sunset. On one occasion, both Bose and Kalpana spend a night in different rooms in the same guesthouse. Kalpana's feelings towards Bose are depicted in a dream song sequence in which the latter, dressed as a beast, threatens to rape her. This masochistic fantasy is preceded by another, earlier in the film, when Kalpana, struggling against an imagined rape attempt by Bose, is brought back to her senses by the startled Bose, who goes on to advice her to see a doctor and seek medication for 'weakness of the nerves', no doubt a gentle rebuke for attributing a lustful gaze to him.

These scenes in the film need to be seen in the context of the production of the lower caste, particularly Dalit, male as the sexual aggressor who habitually subjects upper caste women to sexual assault. This construction of the lower caste male assumes tremendous significance in the wake of the Chunduru massacre.[13] The upper castes sought to justify the killings by claiming that Dalit men had, for years, harassed upper caste women and therefore deserved to die. Tharu and Niranjana (1996) point out that in Chunduru, upper caste women complained

that they needed protection from sexual assaults by Dalit men and even attacked visiting politicians for failing to protect them.

In *Mutha Mestri,* literally, and as in the public domain itself, the anxiety caused by the excessively masculine lower caste male is a direct consequence of his presence in spaces to which he does not belong, places that were hitherto out of his bounds. What the film presents is the encounter between the lower caste minister and the upper caste working woman who are *both* out of their 'place' in society. The film complicates the picture by suggesting that Kalpana's anxiety is, in fact, a sexual fantasy. As I pointed out, with reference to the Chiranjeevi character in *Gharana Mogudu*, the working class hero doesn't have to do anything—his very presence is enough to trigger-off the wildest fantasies/fears. In a film like this, when there is a dangerously direct reference to anxiety-inducing political battles, the mismatch between these and the conservative resolution of the film itself is thrown into sharp focus.

Bose brings much more than rampant sexuality to the domain of parliamentary democracy. His friends from the basti, too, make frequent and disruptive appearances in ceremonies and places associated with officialdom. The frequent appearance of the masses in such spaces notwithstanding, the only significant movement between the slum and the assembly is made by Bose himself. Indeed, his constituency literally leaves him under the charge of Kalpana and returns to its place. Bose goes about working for the interests of the common people, *representing* them, in the sense of working for them, but more importantly inhabiting the domain of formal politics for them and as one of them. Within the narrative framework of the film, the only obstacle to the welfare and other governmental functions of the state are the villains—the bad elements. So, once he gets rid of them, the honest Chief Minister can deliver welfare. What the superannuated Gandhian cannot do is represent the masses in the sense of speaking as one of them. That task Bose is uniquely capable of doing and he can do it from the slum.

So, at the very end of the film, erasing the distinction between the star and the protagonist, Chiranjeevi/Bose says, looking into the camera, that he would rather be the mestri of seven crore Telugu people: possibly a tongue-in-cheek rejection of the possibility of the star entering politics, which, in an act of disavowal was interpreted in some journalistic quarters as a statement exactly to the contrary, or, a hint that he should never be counted out of the race. As it turned out, a good fifteen years later, Chiranjeevi had, in fact, assured the viewer that he would cross

over, given time. Back then, however, by the end of the film, Bose was back in the slum and Chiranjeevi limited himself to the mass film (or rather, a career in the industry). Interestingly, the return of both avatars is to the *representational mandate,* which is quite distinct from the welfarist one. Rather than provide for the poor, the star-protagonist will speak for them. It is important that we note that the representational and welfarist domains are imaged as separate, if overlapping, modes of politics. The mass film itself is centred on representational politics, elaborated in the interplay between likeness and distinction and complex processes of nomination or endorsement of the representative's role, not to mention the production of affect and enjoyment as the 'glue' that bonds the diegetic and spectatorial collectives, respectively.

4

Fans, Families, and Phantoms
Alluda Majaka Revisited

Background

The mid-1990s was critical for Chiranjeevi's career as also the mass film. Inaugurating a period of upheaval and hitherto unprecedented crisis in Telugu cinema was the censorship controversy around *Alluda Majaka*. By the time the film was released (on 24 February 1995) it had already overcome a censor problem. The Examining Committee (EC) of the Hyderabad Regional Office of the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) had apparently proposed 50 cuts in the film, according to some reports. This was something of a record for a big budget Telugu film. The film's producer, Devi Varaprasad appealed against the decision and the film was re-examined. A Revising Committee (RC), headed by T. Subbirami Reddy, who happens to be one of Chiranjeevi's former producers (*State Rowdy*), saw the film and decided to withdraw 20 cuts (Srihari 1995b).[1] The film's release was greeted by highly critical reviews, rare for major releases in those days, due to the long history of the dependence of the film press on the film industry for information and advertising revenues. Soon, there were protests against the film across the state involving not only groups specializing in fighting obscenity but also student and women's organizations across the political spectrum. A court case was filed against the film. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and TDP members voiced their concerns against obscenity in the media, and its effects, on the floor of the state assembly. About three weeks after the film was released, the Regional Office of the CBFC wrote to the Central Board seeking permission to re-censor the film, in the light of the protests against it. This permission

was granted even as the film was running to packed houses (Srihari 1995b). While the opposition to the film gained momentum, Chiranjeevi fans in various parts of the state went on hunger strikes demanding that the film should not be banned (see Figs 33–34).

Two months after the film was released, when it was rumoured that the Censor Board's decision was forthcoming, Chiranjeevi fans held a rally in Hyderabad in support of the film (25 April 1995). They declared that additional cuts in the film would not be acceptable but also stated that they would respect the decision of the court (where the case against the film was being heard), even if it went against the film (*Spotnews* 1995). Additional cuts were recommended by the Board, after the film had run for close to three months, but opponents of the film claim that these were not implemented (Asleelata Pratighatana Vedika 1995).[2]

In this chapter, I revisit the controversy around *Alluda Majaka* to elaborate on the challenges posed to students of cinema by the obvious and innumerable instances of the dovetailing of cinema into various kinds of mobilizations. Fans' associations and election campaigns are the more obvious instances of the overlap, in our context. Less region specific but, in fact, more prevalent in different parts of the country, is the anti-obscenity campaign. In all three instances, credulousness of

Rallying Behind the Star

Fig. 33: J. Hemachandra Rao (right), President, All India Chiranjeevi Fans' Association, Nellore begins his fast unto death on 24 April to 'Resist attempts to suspend the screening of *Alluda Majaka*'.
Source: CO.

Fig. 34: J. Hemachandra Rao breaks his fast on the 4th day (28 April 1995) after assurances from the local Deputy Superintendent of Police (seen in the picture to the left of Chiranjeevi's image).
Source: CO.

certain categories of viewers is a crucial framing device for interpreting the work of the cinema. Scholarly analyses of both fans' associations and star-politicians' electoral campaigns suggest that, in both sites, the mobilized are marked by their credulity. In the discussion below, I will show how important the invocation of the credulous viewer is, for arguments in favour of censorship. Although I will question such arguments, it is not my intention to disprove or dismiss them by claiming disingenuously that, in reality, there is no such thing as a credulous viewer. Instead, I will draw attention to two categories of credulous viewers. The first is a discursive construct that has been around for almost as long as the cinema, itself. The second is the fan, who insists that there be continuity between the screen images of the star. The *Alluda Majaka* controversy was unique in that it brought together both categories of credulous viewers, even as it pitted opponents and supporters of the film in a direct confrontation with each other.

Anti-obscenity campaigns targeting not only films but also other popular cultural forms (novels, magazines, etc.) and practices (recording dance), were a regular part of public life in the 1980s and 1990s. It, therefore, makes sense for a book like this to discuss the anti-obscenity campaign. Furthermore, *Alluda Majaka* sparked-off one of the largest campaigns against obscenity in the state, and was also one of the earliest instances

when fans rallied in favour of a film targeted by anti-obscenity groups. The controversy is, indeed, fortuitous as far as this book is concerned. Given the frequency with which individual mass films came under attack for their vulgarity, a massive campaign against a film of the genre was waiting to happen. More importantly, against the backdrop of violent fan protests against the odd star vehicle that did not match up to their expectations, a mobilization seeking an outright ban against a film of the genre is but a mirror-opposite of the cinephiliac excesses traceable to the spectatorial regime instituted by the genre.

In my earlier attempt at analysing the controversy, a major concern was to demonstrate the problem with obscenity as the basis for a leftist cultural intervention.[3] At that time, this seemed important because leftist student and women's groups and feminist writers were prominent in the numerous agitations against obscenity, but worse, obscenity was among the very few issues leftist groups even raised in their discussions of popular culture. Indeed, obscenity became the only form of exploitative representation that could be agitated against. Some of the points I tried to raise in my earlier examination of the controversy have been elaborated on, in greater detail and with more clarity, by other researchers in the past decade.[4]

Apart from the impressive growth in the volume and sophistication of cultural theory in the intervening years, there has been a marked shift in the attitudes of some of the key players involved in this controversy, which, too, necessitates a change of analytical focus. The most striking has been the gradual withdrawal of the Left (parliamentary as well as radical and including feminist groups) from anti-obscenity campaigns. A convenient marker of this shift is the controversy around the film *Fire* (Deepa Mehta 1996, Indian release 1998), during which violent protests against the film by Shiv Sena were complemented by rallies in support of the film by lesbian groups.[5] Post *Fire*, there has been a noticeable scaling down of the investment of the Left in anti-obscenity campaigns, although, at the local level, many leftist groups in Andhra Pradesh continue to remain active on this front. Rather than trying to explain why this shift has occurred, I draw attention to the anxieties that frame the 1990s anti-obscenity campaigns and place them in historical perspective.

I revisit Telugu cinema's most famous censorship controversy in recent history, at a time when it is not cinema at all but television, the internet, and even the cell phone that have become the site of the anxieties that the cinema once housed. Is it possible, that, as the cinema

is dispersed across media forms and new formats, its phantoms, too, find other niches to haunt us? What lessons does the cinema of the 1990s have for the present?

Scholars working on early/silent cinema have drawn attention to the extent to which debates on censorship, on the one hand, and regulatory efforts on the part of the state or censor agencies, on the other, were shaped by the presumption of cinema's propensity to (negatively) influence certain categories of people. Annette Kuhn, in her study of censorship in early twentieth century Britain, points out, 'During this period [1909–25], strategies for regulation of cinema were guided by assumptions about *who* cinema was for' (1988: 119, original emphasis). Her work alerts us to the critical role played by 'fears about the peculiar vulnerability of certain social groups to cinema in the attempts to regulate it' (Kuhn 1988: 120). Stephen Hughes makes a similar point when he states, 'Virtually all claims about the meaning and power of the silent cinema in India implicitly relied on some notion of *who* the cinema was for or what it did to some class of film goers' (1996: 199, original emphasis).

In their analysis of landmark legal judgments, in the US and India, which paved the way for pre-censorship of cinema, Lawrence Liang et al. argue, 'It is the idea of who is watching a film that becomes the basis of the capacity of cinema for evil, and the relation of this particular public, to the apparatus as well as through the apparatus to themselves, that distinguishes the cinema from other communication medi[a]' (2007: 28). The authors also note: 'the experience of cinema is often narrated as the experience of bewitchment, hypnosis, being put under a spell, the viewer being in a state of trance, and finally the ability of the cinema to make the viewer come under its undue influence' (p. 29).

Anne Friedberg alerts us to another major source of anxiety, imitation of the star's actions: 'All demands for film censorship stem from the position that the cinema encourages imitation/mimetic incorporation of the harmful, illegal, or immoral actions of a character, actor, or star. In short, a fear of identification' (1990: 44).

From these writings, it is possible to arrive at the following generalization on the perceived harm caused by cinema: the problem with the cinema is not only the fact that it is packed with morally degenerate content, but that this is far too easily available to people who are incapable of telling the difference between fiction and real life. In other words, the cinema is a problem for society and governments alike, because of the credulousness of its audience.

First, let me briefly point to the historical evidence, in support of this formulation, which Stephen Hughes (1996) and M. Madhava Prasad (2004) have discussed with reference to the Indian context. Stephen Hughes points out, 'The first attempt to control cinema exhibition in the south was not aimed at protecting the physical safety of audience so much as their moral safety' (1996: 113). The immediate issue was the worry about the potential ill effects of the natives, watching sexually available white women on stage and screen alike.

Interestingly, although The Indian Cinematograph Act, 1918 cites 'the rapid growth in the popularity of cinematograph and increasing number of such exhibitions in India' as the reason for the introduction of the regime of regulation, the anticipatory nature of the move becomes evident from figures put out by various reports generated around this time. The *Evans Report on Indian Cinema* (1921) reveals that the 1918 act was going to regulate all of about 170 cinemas confined to urban areas and spread across the subcontinent. The largest ever enquiry into the state of the cinema in India, which resulted in the *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927–28* (1928), suggests that the reading of another contemporary report, *The Film in National Life*, was *disproportionate* to the minuscule actual reach of cinema in India in the late silent era:

> At the time of the report, 1928 (we have no later figures), it was easy to turn the film to the service of civilization: its influence was hardly felt in India. There were only some 300 permanent cinema houses in the country—one to about a million of the population. The United States of America at the same time had one to 6000. About a third of the cinemas in India catered exclusively for Europeans and Westernised Indians. In addition there were about another hundred travelling cinemas, which showed mostly old and worn films, and existed precariously on the edge of bankruptcy, barely touching the fringe of the vast rural population of India (Commission on Educational and Cultural Films 1932: 131).

Thus, although the actual number of people that the cinema could damage was rather small at this time, the colonial government's attitude to the cinema was guided by a sense of anticipation that had much to do with the career of the cinema in the US and UK, where it spread much earlier than in India. This sense of anticipation is closely related to the political context (rise of Indian nationalism) and economic factors (the decline of the British film industry). The *Evans Report* begins by laying out what it sees as the key issues at hand:

> There are two requirements for the successful operation of cinema publicity in India ['the extension of the industry' and 'regulation of the programme']; and

unless these can be obtained not only must all thought of healthy development be abandoned, but in addition *serious consequences may ensue through the perversion of what is now the most powerful weapon in the armoury of the propagandist* [emphasis added].

A more persuasive case for the controlled growth of the cinema under the gaze of the state was, perhaps, never made. Presumably, the great potential and danger of the cinema was that its audience believed what they saw, so the government had to either make sure that they saw what was right for them or lose them to the enemy.

This collective, believing what it sees and imitating actions performed on the screen, has been identified as natives, the lower classes, women, children, etc. in different historical and geographical contexts. In the context of Telugu cinema, for example, members of what was possibly among the first anti-obscenity forums, were quoted by a film magazine in 1978 as stating that the cinema was capable not only of revolutionary change but also incalculable harm to the youth.[6]

The specificity of the collective at each point of time and place should not obscure us to its shared features. Further, in all discussions of influence and imitation there is a striking exteriorization and othering of the credulous viewer: the cinema always fools someone other than me. Christian Metz's observation on this entity cautions us against reducing the issue to one of social stereotypes of audiences.

In his discussion of Octave Mannoni's work on theatrical illusion, Christian Metz argues that the audience *knows* that film is a fiction but 'everything [in cinema] happens as if there was nonetheless someone to be deceived, someone who really would "believe in it"' (Metz 1982: 72). Who, if it all such a person does exist, can it be? Metz elaborates:

> [T]he credulous person is, of course, another part of ourselves, he is still seated *beneath* the incredulous one, or in his heart, it is he who continues to believe, who disavows what he knows (he for whom all human beings are still endowed with a penis). But by a symmetrical and simultaneous movement, the incredulous person disavows the credulous one; no one will admit that he is duped by the 'plot'. That is why the instance of credulousness is often projected into the outer world and constituted as a separate person, a person completely abused by the diegesis. … By a partial identification with this character, the spectators can sustain their credulousness in all incredulousness (pp. 72–3, original emphasis).

In my examination of the film *Alluda Majaka* and the responses to it by the rainbow coalition of anti-obscenity campaigners, on the one

hand, and Chiranjeevi fans' associations, on the other, I will track the eternal regression of a particularly dangerous kind of phantom viewer. The credulous viewer was seen as being responsible for a host of very real threats and events of actual violence against women. Apart from the fact of the controversy, the film's complex interplay between belief and its disavowal makes it a particularly good example of *production and censorship of 'obscenity' within the domain of the fiction, itself*, as if rendering the anti-obscenity campaign redundant. Needless to say, the film itself does not make any sense unless it is situated within the history of the mass film and its mode of deploying stars.

The Controversy and its Object

The scale of protests against *Alluda Majaka* was a direct consequence of a high level of organization that had been achieved in the campaigns against obscenity since the 1980s. As pointed out above, from the late 1970s there have been reports of meetings and agitations against obscenity. By the time the film was released, a well-established anti-obscenity network was already in place. While a number of groups, especially women's groups affiliated to Naxalite parties and BJP, had been protesting against obscenity for over a decade, a landmark development was the formation of the Asleelata Pratighatana Vedika (Anti-Obscenity Forum) by the Gandhi Smaraka Samiti, an organization based in Narsaraopet town. The forum came into existence in 1986 and launched a series of campaigns against obscenity in various popular cultural forms. The list of its bad objects, which find a mention in most of its publications, includes obscene films, serialized novels, advice columns dedicated to 'sex problems', film posters, and also recording dance. The Vedika had targeted the film industry in the past and was a key player in the campaign to ban the film *Teneteega* (M. Nandakumar 1991, based on a controversial novel of the same name). By the early 1990s, this forum had 25 units across the state. Their state level conventions were being attended by respected actors, film critics, members of the VIRASAM (Viplava Rachayitala Sangham [Revolutionary Writers' Association], an important cultural front of Naxalite parties), left-wing student organizations, and women's groups. The forum invited organizations and individuals regardless of political affiliations to participate in its activities and also ran a magazine, *Naitika Viplavam*, which was largely dedicated to its anti-obscenity campaigns. The forum went on to create an alternative fan club, the Fair Films Fans' Association (FFFA), which promotes good cinema and educates the public about the need for it.[7]

The activities and alliances of the Anti-Obscenity Forum, in spite of the marginal presence of the forum, itself, outside a few coastal Andhra districts, suggest that a broad-based consensus was emerging that obscenity caused considerable harm to society. The strength of the anti-obscenity discourse lies in its ability to make a direct link between an entire socio-political order gone wrong and obscenity, which in turn, could be traced to contamination by, new forms of imperialism/Westernization and/or media forms. In the campaigns, obscenity comes across as, at once, a symptom of and cause for the crumbling of the institutions of society, which are the signs of our times. Not only the political right but the left, too, comes across as being deeply distressed by the breakdown. At a public meeting held by the Naxalite women's group Mahila Chetana to protest against obscenity, a young woman is reported to have said, 'Owing to the influence of cinema even those who are like brothers [*annayya varasa ayyevalley*] say "I love you"' (*Mahila Margam,* April–June 1996: 23).

With specific reference to Telugu cinema, too, there was a narrative of degeneration, which points to the mid- to late 1960s as a turning point (for the worse).[8] While there is no factual basis to this claim, by the late 1960s, obscenity was one of the major themes around which popular discussions on the cinema were centred. Notice, for example, that from 1969 onwards, readers and journalists of various newspapers and magazines repeatedly asked the revolutionary poet Sri Sri (who also wrote lyrics for dozens of films) to account for the increasing obscenity in films (Sri Sri 1990: 35, 39, 93, and passim). When the Vedika began holding its annual conventions in the 1990s, there was a more or less complete consensus on a number of issues, including that of the nature of contemporary cinema and society.

Give or take a few causes or agents, there is virtually no difference between the various participants in the anti-campaign in establishing a series of links between culture, society, and politics.[9] I will summarize below a pamphlet by the Vedika, to show how obscenity assumes primacy as the cause of a major crisis. The pamphlet, inviting the public to its second annual convention, explains: under the influence of a poisonous and immoral culture, today's youth harass girls/women, drink, commit atrocities, and indulge in sadistic acts, theft and other such anti-social activities. They choose violence, murder, and rioting and vengeful acts as the means of solving their problems. The result is the increase in the crime rate (violent crime figures for the previous year are provided to prove this). When we probe into the reasons for this situation we

realize that a system of government headed by incompetent, corrupt and selfish people and a commercial-exploitative poisonous culture (*vyapara-dopidi vishasamskruti*) are responsible. This culture, manifest in pornographic videos, obscene films, wall posters, serialized novels, etc. is a part of a ruling class (*palaka vargam*) conspiracy to drug the crisis-ridden youth into senselessness so that the exploitation of society may continue unchecked (Asleelata Pratighatana Vedika 1992). The pamphlet, thus, arrives at the youth, the agent of social transformation, as a victim of obscenity. What hope can there be for a society whose youth are in a stupor?

A brief examination of the claims made by Naxalite women's groups demonstrates the degree of continuity between the Vedika and organizations that may otherwise have little in common with it. For the Naxalite groups, too, the audience is first, the *victim* of cinema and other media. In the 1990s, according to this section, the media began to transmit imperialist propaganda, making the media/carrier all the more dangerous. One activist is reported to have said, 'Obscene culture is imperialist culture. It distracts people from the struggle to solve their problems. It is a culture which emasculates them [*nirveeryulani chestundi*]' (*Mahila Margam* April-June 1996: 53). A pamphlet by Mahila Chetana, occasioned by an acid attack on a woman student by a man who claimed to be her lover, points out, '[T]his poisonous imperialist culture, this STAR [TV] and film culture, not only ensures that the youth do not have the time to think about society but it also completely misleads them' (Mahila Chetana [n.d.]).

There is no denying that the crimes and hardships the pamphlets draw attention to, are real. However, what is at issue, and questionable, in their claims is the explanation for them. Sandhya, President of the Progressive Organization of Women (POW) and a prominent figure in the anti-obscenity campaigns in the late 1980s and early 1990s, argues that in the 1990s, 'Women are being commodified in the name of modernization. Obscenity is gaining currency through beauty contests and fashion parades'. The danger is of, 'urban-elite, imperialist culture making inroads into the lower classes'. As a result, 'the youth are getting spoilt (*paadai potunnaru*), values are being eroded'.[10] And most importantly, 'people these days tend to imitate the actions they see in films and television, leading to violent sex crimes against women', argues Sandhya. A further notable point is that the 'ladies' and 'women' who constantly appear in the anti-obscenity campaign are variants of the *woman-subject* that Tharu and Niranjana (1996) discuss with reference

to the political events of the 1990s. They are not only imaged as upper caste and middle class but also in situations of fundamental antagonism to the lower class-caste male.

The consensus on the range of issues addressed by the anti-obscenity campaign is so complete that *everyone* who had a role to play in the controversy shared it, squabbling only over details. R. Swamy Naidu, Secretary of the State Wide Chiranjeevi Youth Welfare Association and one of the organizers of the fan rally in support of the film, argues, 'some youth think they can imitate what films show', forgetting that 'cinema is only for relaxation'. He estimates that 5 per cent of the population, all of which comprises of the youth, get spoilt (*paadai potaru*) because of 'crime and exposure in films and end up committing crime' (Interview, Hyderabad, 13 November 1996).

What is not in doubt, therefore, is that 'youth', and other categories of nondescript masses or 'people' are the victims of cinema/media. They are also the aggressors who victimize women. A pamphlet by another Naxalite women's group concludes, 'The extent of the impact of cinema, STAR culture [in a patriarchal society] ... is evident from the day-to-day increase in the attacks and crimes against women' (Andhra Pradesh Chaitanya Mahila Samakhya [nd]). Increasing violence against women is explained, made intelligible, as the influence of cinema (and other media) on potential aggressors who are transformed into actual aggressors.

Vijayalakshmi, the President of the Bharatiya Janata Mahila Morcha (BJMM), Andhra Pradesh, during the *Alluda Majaka* controversy, took an active part in the campaign against it. Her prior campaigns included raids against the infamous Lighthouse cinema hall in Abids, Hyderabad (now closed), which routinely screened sex-films. Unsuspecting viewers would have their faces blackened with tar by her group. The one major difference between her understanding of obscenity and her leftist counterparts in the anti-obscenity campaign, is that her biases are undisguised. She feels that upper class men are not influenced by cinema in any significant way. Cinema makes, 'youth and lower classes ask "should we drink, commit crime, rape"?'[11] For Vijayalakshmi, too, cinema is part of a larger problem: the breakdown of traditional values, family, and society. Today's cinema teaches male and female 'students', yet another credulous collective, 'how to elope, love, have sex'. Society is, thus, already on the road to ruin. She says helplessly, 'There is a limit to how much we [the BJMM] can do. Society should change'. According to her, 'Ours is a society in which parents no longer care about the

way their daughters dress. In fact, 'parents are encouraging the spread of vulgar fashions'. However, she adds, it is cinema which popularizes these 'fashions'. The way heroines dress, for example, is imitated by young girls. Vijayalakshmi argues that girls and their parents are partly responsible for sexual harassment by men because the way girls dress 'can have an impact on men'. She feels, 'this generation is interested in [night] clubs, disco, fast music … drinking and cinema have a powerful impact [on it]'.

An important feature of the anti-obscenity discourse is its unease and even horror of dislocation, of things and bodies that are *out of their place*. The obscene object is not always an object that ought not to exist due to inherent qualities, like a sexually explicit film, for example. But, like STAR television or 'imperialist culture' in general, it is something that appears where it does not belong. Take, for example, the campaigns that find mention in the Vedika pamphlet (1992) cited above. They targeted serials/columns in widely circulated and otherwise respectable magazines (like *Andhra Jyothi* weekly) and mainstream Telugu films (*Teneteega* and later *Alluda Majaka*). The charge is not sexual explicitness of the kind that is associated with pornography proper, but titillating or suggestive sequences, whose very appeal lies in what is censored or left unsaid.

There is a fascinating symbiosis between the campaign and the obscene object. The latter's very existence presumes a prior act of censorship. Film posters advertising 'sex films', about which I will have more to say below, are illustrative of this relationship. They routinely turn the act of censorship into a *promise*. Invariably, these posters appear in public only after distributors and cinema hall managements blacken exposed body parts of women featured on them. This 'colour coding' promises an explicit sequence, which may or may not actually be featured in the film. Anti-obscenity campaigns repeatedly blacken such posters all over again. But, apart from an occasional symbolic raid on cinema halls showing these films, most campaigners in the 1990s did not really bother with sex films, which were, in fact, proliferating massively throughout the 1980s and 1990s.[12] A significant exception has been the Anti-Obscenity Forum, which puts out lists of obscene films, including sex films, in *Naitika Viplavam*. However, for most campaigners, film posters were a concern because they were everywhere and 'poisoning the minds of even children' (Andhra Pradesh Chaitanya Mahila Samakhya [n.d.]).

Embarrassment, caused by dislocated objects and bodies to certain categories of people, is inextricable from a sense of *danger*. The problem with obscenity is not just that it causes harm to women in public places but it ruins the pleasure of 'ladies' and 'families' and embarrasses them. Both Vijayalakshmi and leftist women's groups spoke of the impossibility of 'women' watching most films, because they were likely to be obscene. Vijayalakshmi argues, 'It is possible that an unfamiliar male [*parayi magavadu*—one who is not the husband or a relative] sits beside me [in the theatre]. When that scene [an obscene sequence she was describing] appears on the screen, I don't know what his feelings are but *ladies* feel very *uneasy*' (emphases indicate the use of English words in the original statement). According to the Chaitanya Mahila Samakhya pamphlet (cited above), 'Today's films cannot be watched by all the members of the family... [they] portray women only as sex objects'.

The choice of examples and targets suggests that the anti-obscenity campaign is far more committed to the stamping out of sources of embarrassment than exploitation. The inconsistency between the vocabulary of gender exploitation/oppression and the choice of obscene objects as a source of the problem is so obvious in the leftist interventions, that it would suffice to note it in passing. Whereas the charge of gender oppression can be brought against a number of 'clean family films', of the kind promoted by film critics identified with anti-obscenity campaigns and Fair Films Fans' Association, obscenity alone has been a campaign issue.

Let me propose that the reason we need to revisit this controversy is not to find fault with activists of another period, but to zero in on embarrassment and credulousness as the key issues that emerge from the 1990s discussions. The usefulness of the anti-obscenity campaign lies in its foregrounding of these issues that are critical for understanding spectatorship itself.

The alleged consumer of obscenity, he who derives pleasure rather than embarrassment from it, and is, of course, influenced by it, is a variant of the Metzian credulous spectator. He is definitely not I. Who then *is* the consumer of obscenity?

K. Narasaiah, former distributor and respected industry analyst, actually argues that obscene cinema's audience, the mass, is not only male and lower class but is also an audience of criminals. He feels that the increase of obscenity in the 1980s is a direct consequence of

the changed composition of the audience. He feels that in the past, a significant proportion of the audience comprised of middle and lower middle-class families. With the arrival of television and video, they abandoned cinema to, 'mechanics, artisans, rowdies, crooks, etc.' (Interview, Vijayawada, 19 December 1996). His argument should not be read merely as a moral condemnation but as a disappointment with the industry for losing sight of its business model that is *founded on its ability to attract a socially mixed audience*. In the 1980s, Narasaiah objected to cinema halls reducing the number of seats in the lowest priced category and pointed out that the film industry could not possibly survive without the support of its poorest customers (Narasaaiah 1981: 150). However, Narasaiah's argument is often inverted in the obscenity debate to make the claim that the middle and lower middle-class families, and therefore, 'women', abandoned cinema halls *because* of the increased obscenity in films. The genre catering to the lower class, criminal, male audience is, of course, our mass film.

Are not the 'artisans, rowdies crooks, etc.' accompanied by their 'families' (wives)? The point is not the actual presence or absence of women but their visibility. This not only depends on their class status but also the kind of film they are supposed to enjoy watching. The opponents and supporters of *Alluda Majaka* were so sure that 'women' are embarrassed by obscenity that, in their narratives, it is the presence or absence of women that allowed them to determine the status of a film as obscene or clean. The film's producer, while accepting the dominant construction of the audience of obscenity, arrived at the conclusion that *Alluda Majaka* was not obscene at all by applying a simple rule of thumb. He repeatedly claimed that he and all the others associated with the film had seen it with their *families* and found that *female viewers* were uniformly appreciative. Further, he pointed out in a newspaper interview that special screenings organized for women were well attended and none of the viewers of such shows complained about obscenity (*Andhra Jyothi* 1995). Chiranjeevi fans, too, claimed that the film was being watched by women and was *therefore* not obscene (Spotnews 1995: 12). This line of argument did not convince the film's opponents who continued to assert that women did not watch the film.

Gudipoodi Srihari, the most influential film critic of his generation, has been a participant in anti-obscenity campaigns since the early 1990s. He was often invited to the meetings of the Anti-Obscenity Forum. Simultaneously, he has been largely appreciative of Chiranjeevi's work.

His most important contribution to the *Alluda Majaka* controversy, was the highly critical review in *Sitara*, which, chronologically speaking was the first public statement against the film.[13] Srihari argues that Chiranjeevi lost women viewers due to *Alluda Majaka*. He suggests that the masses are indirectly responsible for the making of obscene films like *Alluda Majaka* because, 'no producer is really interested in playing with sex'.[14] The risk of censorship or outright denial of a censor certificate is too high for producers to take.

We know, by now, that obscenity and the masses are a deadly combination. Swamy Naidu, paradoxically echoes Srihari in his defence of the film when he says, 'The mass audience needs *masala*'. According to him, however, this film was well within the limits of decency, as was clear from the large number of women who had watched it.

Alluda Majaka was marked as a mass film, not only in generic terms but also in terms of its intended audience. When the film was being made, Chiranjeevi seemed to agree with the future opponents of the film, when he said, with profound regret, that his audience did not accept his experiments with 'serious' roles:

> When we [stars] try to satisfy our artistic urge by doing performance-oriented roles, they [fans/masses] are not satisfied. We survive because of them … [So] I decided that my duty [*dharmam*] was to the mass audience. They are the ones who love me. They made me popular. So, although I have the desire to do other roles, finally I decided to do what they like (Interview, Madras, 22 January 1995).

For Chiranjeevi, his fans, and critics, the 'masses' comprise the majority of popular cinema's audience. In the obscenity debates, they are indistinguishable from 'lumpens' and 'rowdies' for all practical purposes. These are the people who do not and also cannot appreciate serious cinema. So well does Chiranjeevi know his masses that he went on to add, 'If it [*Alluda Majaka*] clicks, it will be proved that they want [me to play] these ["non-serious"] roles'.

It is useful to keep in mind that in the film industry's scheme of things, the mass audience, though imaged as male, does not necessarily come at the cost of the 'class audience' or 'families' (middle class women). One set of advertisements of the film claimed that *Alluda Majaka*'s appeal was truly universal: 'Women, men, children, adults, class and mass: appealing to them all is the speciality of this "Gharana Alludu"', says the text of a newspaper advertisement of the film, playing with the titles of earlier films by the star (*Andhra Jyothi* 17 March 1995: 7).

I will note in passing that, the '*andarivadu*' figure makes a surprising appearance in the wake of the controversy surrounding the film. The advertisement also brings to mind the long history of imaging the cinema audience as a mixed one and a microcosm of the society. Narasaiah and Srihari, in their own ways, were alerting the industry to what they thought was a negative development: cinema's audience was becoming segregated and obscenity, whether it is understood as the consequence or cause of this, was a sign of this development. The problem at hand was a serious one in business terms, too.

An observation made by Vijayalakshmi makes a direct link between obscenity, embarrassment, and the lower class audience. Referring to a scene (which has the heroine 'offering' her husband to his former lover), she asked, 'What kind of an impact will this have on the audience? … They cheered and whistled. *They were enjoying it*. Who? Those who sat in the "C" class [front seats]' (emphasis added). Interestingly, the sequence referred to by Vijayalakshmi, was presumed to be obscene not because it is sexually explicit but because it is morally offensive and *embarrassing*, all the more so because 'they were enjoying it'. An audience that is capable of cheering and whistling at what is shameful and offensive to women, must be a criminal audience.

What then *is* obscenity? Srihari says, obscenity is 'vulgarity of expression', thinly veiled references to private parts and sexual intercourse in dialogues and lyrics, bodily exposure, physical gestures suggesting sexual intercourse. Enjoyed by the masses in their ignorance and tastelessness, it deeply disturbs 'civilised society and makes it feel ashamed', to borrow a phrase from a pamphlet by a women's group (Andhra Pradesh Chaitanya Mahila Samakhya, op. cit.). According to Srihari, it is not possible to clearly define obscenity. We recognize it when we come across it: '[A]ny normal, thinking person, with average intelligence, cannot enjoy it [obscenity] and reacts negatively'. On the other hand, 'some in the audience do not find anything obscene'. They are, of course, the masses. Why are we 'naturally' outraged and offended by obscenity? Because, Srihari suggests, the primary source of obscenity is the entry of the 'sex-act' into the public (from the private) domain via cinema. This is one of the reasons why the masses and obscenity go together. Unlike 'us', the educated, middle-class people, 'coolies, uneducated people, have a different [notion of the] sex-act. They live under trees, in shacks and don't have privacy. They have sex under trees, we in the bedroom. Their sex-act is reflected in films and they enjoy it.'

We therefore return to the root of the problem: *out-of-place-ness*, of sex in the wrong places (screen), sexual desire expressed by the wrong person ('heroine chasing the hero'), and for the wrong person, become instances of the obscene.

By definition, obscenity is that which gives pleasure to someone other than me. Indeed, obscenity necessarily requires the clear separation of the speaking/suffering subject and the other. If I do not enjoy it, why does it exist? Obviously because someone else does.

It appeals only to the masses even as it instigates them into criminality. The acute awareness of the presence of the other in the cinema hall, is one of the reasons for the anxiety around obscenity. The cinema hall's history as a site for social mixture makes it a prime location for causing embarrassment. Some of the anti-obscenity campaigners are seriously concerned about what ideas *they* will get about *us*.

Obscenity produces an enjoyment of an excessive kind. It is linked to criminality, tastelessness, and the '*Not* I'. Such enjoyment also displaces what ought to be the correct response to the source: embarrassment. The screen rowdy is implicated is a rather direct way in the production and enjoyment of obscenity. His on screen presence in the mass film finds a correlative in the cinema's lower class audience, for whom he performs. There is a danger of his excesses manifesting in the phantom audience—constituting anywhere between 5 per cent (Swamy Naidu) and the totality of the viewership of a certain kind of cinema (the thieves and crooks of Narasaiah's analysis).

Notwithstanding the competing mobilizations and innumerable differences between the various players, the controversy is founded on consensual notions of what obscenity is and why it is harmful to society. In my examination of the film, I will show how embarrassment and credulousness, the mirror opposites of obscenity discussions, make an uncanny appearance in the fiction forcing us to move beyond taking positions on censorship, to recognizing the prohibitions that frame popular cinema. *The obscene film exists because it recognizes our worst fears.*

The Film

I will focus on the so-called obscene sequences of the film to draw attention to the framing of the narrative as the dialectic between transgression of social order and its punishment. The rowdy figure in the film does not really exist, but is *imagined* into existence in order to prohibit and reverse transgressive actions. The entire film, including the

objectionable sequences, hinges on the interplay between the knowing spectator and his credulous counterpart, who is in the fiction.

Alluda Majaka is, in many ways, a typical mass film. It closely resembles Chiranjeevi's *Attaku Yamudu Ammayiki Mogudu*, as well as other 'mother-in-law' films that were made in this period. This sub-genre of the mass film features major female stars of an earlier generation as sexualized mothers-in-law of the hero, who have to be tamed along with their daughters. Most of the older female stars in such films had a history of screen eroticism. *Alluda Majaka*'s heroines recall the arrogant upper class women of *Khaidi No. 786* and *Gharana Mogudu*.

In the film, Sitaram (Chiranjeevi) is the son of the benevolent patriarch of his village who has been the village panchayat President for the past 30 years. Sitaram, his family, and the village community are victimized by Vasundhara (Lakshmi) and Peddaiah (Kota Srinivasa Rao). Peddaiah's Non-Resident Indian (NRI) son, Chinna (Chinna) is on the lookout for a bride with Telugu-ness. He comes to the village to 'look' at Vasundhara's elder daughter Pappi (Ramya Krishna), but decides to marry Sitaram's sister, Malleswari (Ooha), a traditional Telugu girl (*Teluginti ammayi*), instead. Peddaiah agrees to the marriage after he realizes that the ancestral land that Sitaram's father had distributed to the landless coolies contains priceless granite deposits. He demands the land as dowry, days before the proposed marriage. Sitaram's father

Fig. 35: A poster of *Alluda Majaka* during its re-rerun in 1997.

refuses to take it back from the coolies. Peddaiah cancels the marriage and Chinna, who has returned to the US, does not know any of this. Vasundhara is angered by Chinna's choice but dupes the coolies, steals their land, and makes a deal with Peddaiah. Chinna's marriage is fixed with Pappi without his knowledge. Meanwhile the villagers come to know that Malleswari is pregnant (Chinna, before returning to America, has had sex with her). Sitaram's father commits suicide when he realizes that the coolies have lost their recently acquired land. Sitaram and Malleswari move to the city, awaiting Chinna's return.

Upon Chinna's return, Malleswari is falsely arrested for prostitution before his eyes. Disgusted, Chinna rejects her. Sitaram is framed (by Peddaiah) in the murder of a police officer and subsequently sentenced to death. He escapes from custody and forcibly marries Pappi who is all set to get married to Chinna. With the help of the lawyer, Sivaram Krishna (Giribabu), the estranged husband of Vasundhara, Sitaram comes out of prison on parole. He is then transformed by his father-in-law into Toyota, a rich NRI on the lookout for an Indian bride, to teach Vasundhara a lesson in femininity and to resolve the multiple crises of the film. After another arrest and a dramatic escape from prison, Sitaram defeats the villains and restores order. Finally, Sivaram Krishna and Vasundhara are reunited, Malleswari marries Chinna, and Sitaram finds himself in a bedroom with Pappi and her younger sister Bappi (Rambha).

Just Desserts and Obscenity

Gudipoodi Srihari identified four sequences whose obscenity alarmed the viewers (1995b: 12).

- First, when the film's bikini clad heroines enter the village tank, the hero strips them. The 'half naked' women are shown for a prolonged

Obscene Sequences from the Film

Fig. 36: The 'naked' heroines

Fig. 37: Sitaram claims he has had sex with one of the three women.

(Contd.)

Fig. 38: The doctor has a fit after examining Abbulu/ Dakota.

duration. [Srihari's description misses an important detail. What makes this sequence obscene is that the hero not only strips them of their swimming costumes but also asks his sidekick Abbulu to empty the tank. The villagers become visibly excited by the prospect of seeing them naked, thus embarrassing the heroines.]

- Second, the hero is in a room making advances to the two heroines, one of whom he has already married, and their mother too. The lights go off for few seconds and when they are switched on again he claims that he has had sex with someone but doesn't know whom. The three women do not deny this but are instead seen adjusting their clothes.
- Third, Abbulu (Brahmanandam), disguised as an NRI *woman,* Dakota (supposedly Toyota's sister), claims to be raped by the chief villain Peddaiah.
- Fourth, the police arrive, believe Abbulu's claim, and take him for a medical examination. The female doctor who examines him has a fit.

It would be incorrect to claim that obscenity is read into innocent sequences by paranoid commentators. The obscene sequence titillates through suggestion and not its explicitness. Lalitha Gopalan (2003) likens the depiction of the female body in Indian films to *coitus interruptus*: 'a cinematic technique that is most visible when the camera withdraws just before we see a sexually explicit scene. In its most benign form the film replaces the "lost scenes" with pastoral evocations of passions' (p. 37). This history of representation is critical for understanding the unease/ embarrassment caused by obscenity. Like the pre-blackened poster, the obscene sequence is always already censored. Its titillation is inextricably linked with disavowal: the 'half naked' heroines were supposedly entirely naked underwater but no one actually saw anything because the tank was, after all, not drained. Dakota was not in fact raped and the spectator in any case does not see what the female doctor saw. This mode of titillation occurs throughout the latter part of the film. To cite another

example, Sitaram is seen dancing with his mother-in-law and the two heroines in the infamous song sequence ('*Atto, attamma kooturo*', which translates as 'mother-in-law and mother-in-law's daughter …') (Fig. 39). While the song's lyrics and visuals openly hint at the transgression of the incest taboo, the entire sequence is presented as a figment of Abbulu/Dakota's imagination. It never really occurs.

There is a second level of censorship to which Chiranjeevi drew attention in one of his statements to the film press in the wake of the controversy (*Eenadu* 1995). He pointed out disingenuously that the sequence involving the hero and the three women was not obscene because the father-in-law of the hero himself plots the incident (in the film Sivaram Krishna switches off the lights too). Furthermore, later in the film, an explanation is offered for what actually transpired (nothing really happened), disabusing the viewer of any illusions.

In his discussion of the informal ban on kissing in Indian films, Madhava Prasad (1998: 88–113) argues that the techniques that are used to prevent the spectator from seeing couples kissing on screen co-exist with the tendency to make a spectacle of the female body. He reads the ban as the attempt by the Indian film industry to institute a series of prohibitions:

> Thus, at the heart of the film industry an informal injunction goes to work to prohibit the representation of kissing and thereby generates a chain of implied prohibitions: the prohibition of representations in private, the prohibition of cinema (in the western 'emblematic' sense), and, we are now in a position to add, the prohibition of the open acknowledgement of the capitalist nature of the new nation-state (p. 103).

Fig. 39: Dakota's fantasy: the hero with the three women. Still from the song '*Atto attamma kooturo*'.

My interest in the techniques of censorship that are internal to the film and frame the narrative, is rather more limited to the working of disavowal, as a source of pleasure and also the means of affirming a deeply conservative morality. As we shall see below, each is closely related to the other. Let me elaborate by focussing on Sivaram Krishna. Why is the older male's role so important for the film?

The film's narrative progresses from transgressive to corrective action: righting of wrongs that have been committed and punishment of wrong-doers. The film can be divided into three segments. Like a typical mass film, a crucial part of the story is narrated in a flashback, when Sitaram reveals his past to Sivaram Krishna. The film, however, begins with Sitaram visiting his village one last time, virtually en route to the gallows. He makes a dramatic escape from the police to forcibly marry Pappi. This inexplicable action is not, in fact, that much of a mystery because flashback fragments alert the spectator to a past that will, no doubt, unfold soon. In this segment, the hero's actions *appear* to be wrongful but they are, in fact, justified. He is motivated by a *prior* set of wrongs committed by Vasundhara or her daughters and Peddaiah, which are explained in the flashback that constitutes the second segment. The in *media res* structure of the narrative provides a delayed but well anticipated explanation for the dramatic events in the first segment. As if refreshing the spectator's memory of the genre and star, the segment makes numerous gestures towards earlier films. For example, the star is introduced in a manner that is reminiscent of *State Rowdy* (booted foot upwards).

In the second segment, we learn of the disruption caused by the three women from their very moment of arrival in Sitaram's village. The first segment was therefore an inversion of the timeline but was also caused by these past events. In the second segment, the explanation is provided for the history of the convict we have seen in the beginning and also his extreme actions.

The third segment brings us back to the present. Now, as a part of Sivaram Krishna's plot, of which the spectator is fully aware, all the crises of the film are resolved, but more importantly, wrong-doers who were responsible for the chaos of the second segment are punished. *All* 'obscene' and other apparently wrongful actions of the hero are either revealed to be or known to be punitive in nature. They are motivated by the need to prohibit certain transgressions/crimes. The victims deserve what they get. The scale of the hero's obscenity is directly proportionate to the original crime that is being punished.

Two of the objectionable instances cited above are particularly important in this regard. The drama at the village water tank is necessitated by the refusal of the heroines to heed the pleas of the villagers that they should not swim in the tank because it provides drinking water to the village. They then refuse to come out of the water or apologize for their action. The narrative suggests that their real crime, the one that is in fact punished, is the willing display of their bodies in a public place. That is an act of *obscenity* because the women are out of their place twice over: in a public place and improperly dressed too.

Similarly, the staged sexual non-assault on the mother-in-law is presented as a direct consequence of a similar transgression. As in *Attaku Yamudu Ammayiki Mogudu*, in this film, too, the rich woman throws out her husband and takes over his responsibilities and even becomes the man of the house. This prior act of obscenity, once again the woman, out of her place physically and symbolically, engenders a whole range of minor obscenities. These lesser obscenities point to a total disruption of the familial order, sexual mores, and also gender confusion. The prospective groom (Toyota) is infatuated with his future mother-in-law. Abbulu becomes a woman and is raped. The raped woman (Dakota) sprouts a penis. And so on.

I note in passing that reversal of gender roles became a recurring theme in popular Telugu cinema in the early 1990s. There are a number of low budget comedies in which the heroes dress like women for prolonged periods of time. Notable among these are *Chirtam Bhalare Vichitram* (P.N. Ramachandra Rao 1991) and *Madam* (Singeetham Sreenivasa Rao 1994). E.V.V. Satyanarayana, the director of *Alluda Majaka* began his career as a director of comedies and made the remarkable *Jambalakidipamba* (1992), in which a feminist mixes a magic portion in the town's water supply, causing the reversal of the gender roles of all the women and men in the village. The female vigilante film, referred to in an earlier chapter, comes out of this historical moment. Satyanarayana was associated with this genre, too.

Returning to this film, spectatorial foreknowledge is absolutely essential for the moral economy of the film. Once the justification for Sitaram's actions is in place (segment two), the film takes a remarkable turn, stringing together one obscene sequence after another, till the action sequences of the climax are reached. Further, the entire third segment is framed by a disavowal: nothing we see is real—not the vulgar actions or even the characters who perform them. What unfolds is an elaborate masquerade whose status as illusion the spectator is fully

aware of but it nevertheless fools all the characters who have to be taught a lesson.

Masquerade

Feminist scholars have used masquerade as a critical-theoretical concept to discuss the performative aspects of gender, in particular femininity. On screen depiction of the femininity, as well as, spectatorial identification with male and female actors, have been important concerns in the discussion.[15] Although Laura Mulvey (1990), herself, did not use the term in her 'Visual Pleasure' essay, her notion of to-be-looked-at-ness and the observation about the glamorous impersonating the ordinary are both crucial starting points for the discussion of the masquerade by feminist scholars. In the Indian context, the work of Mary Ann Doane (1991) is significant because it is a point of departure for Tejaswini Niranjana's (2004) analysis of Vijayashanti's films. Lalitha Gopalan (2003), who, too, uses the concept to discuss Vijayashanti's vigilante films, focuses on gender role-playing and the 'masculinisation' of the protagonist in the star's films. Sumita Chakravarty (1993) sees the masquerade—disguises put on by characters etc.—as a means of addressing socio-political problems confronting the nation.[16] She does not go into questions of masculinity/femininity or stardom.

I use the masquerade with specific reference to the working of stardom. With Doane, Niranjana, and Gopalan, I would argue that the performative dimension is foregrounded during the masquerade. Although a case can be made for the masquerade and hypermasculinity in the mass film, as will become clear from the discussion below, I would like to focus primarily on multiple roles of the star within the same film, rather than the gendering of his body, in my discussion.

In the mass film, masquerade has a story level manifestation, as the protagonist (and other characters) routinely appears in see-through disguises that fool other characters, but not the spectator. On occasion, however, the spectator, too, believes that the protagonist is what he is not. Take for example *State Rowdy*, discussed in Chapter 3, in which the protagonist is presented as a rowdy but turns out to be policeman.

There is also the more foundational level of the masquerade, the star in the disguise of the character. The play with star recognition in the genre, by way of the deployment of the biographical reference and other devices, elevates the given (star is always in a transparent disguise), into a source of pleasure. *Alluda Majaka* offers interesting insights into the masquerading star.

The Masquerading Star

Fig. 40: Toyota 'mistakes' Vasundhara to be his bride.

Fig. 41: Sitaram arrives immediately after Toyota leaves for his 'first night'.

In the post-flashback segment of the film, Sitaram becomes two people, *masquerades* as two people, neither of who is the 'real' him. Toyota is the first to arrive at the Vasundhara household. He immediately makes advances towards Vasundhara (which she rejects), claiming that she is more beautiful than her daughters. His advances necessitate the intervention of Vasundhara's husband, Sivaram Krishna, who re-enters her house as Toyota's acquaintance. He 'saves' Vasundhara by pointing out to Toyota that she is already married to him. Sitaram, this time dressed as a village bumpkin, descends soon after, demanding that his marriage with Pappi be consummated. Upon their arrival, both dupes instantly present themselves as extremely obscene, being not only excessively sexualized, on the one hand, but also by making lewd gestures or advances to the three women on the other.

Both Toyota and Sitaram are ridiculous versions of the Sitaram of the past (shown in the second segment of the film). Toyota's garish clothes, dyed hair, blue eyes, helicopter, sidekick Mandela (actually an autorickshaw driver, played by A.V.S. Subramaniam), and 'sister' Dakota (Abbulu in disguise); Sitaram's dhoti, head cloth, cheap trunk, pumpkin (which he strokes most suggestively), cheroot, and bullock cart are signifiers of their supposed origins, but they also serve to produce the two figures as comic.

The ease with which Sitaram transforms himself into caricatures of the elite and subaltern figures—the standard doubles even in earlier Chiranjeevi films like *Donga Mogudu*—is evidence of the star-protagonist's ability to inhabit two antithetical worlds. In this film, his metamorphoses highlight the dichotomy between the ultra-modern and 'backward' worlds, but in the process, also render the tensions between them, inconsequential. There is a hilarious sequence in which Sitaram and Toyota supposedly fight each other. While Vasundhara and others wait outside the room for the victor to emerge, by a quick change of costume, make-up, and accent, all of which the spectator can see, they are made to believe that every few seconds, one or the other is thrown out of the room. The point, here, is not that there are two heroes (three if we count the 'real' Sitaram), but, as we saw in the previous chapter, two *subject positions*, and, correspondingly, two socio-economic and cultural locations inhabited by these. The hero/star can occupy these positions simultaneously or glide between them with ease.

The real Sitaram corresponds with (or gestures towards) the star Chiranjeevi in that the NRI and villager is this person, in disguise. Spectatorial awareness of the masquerade is complemented by the credulousness of Vasundhara and others, who mistake it to be real. The spectator's knowledge also facilitates the production of sexual aggression and innuendo by both caricatures, not only as highly amusing but also as a lesson in morality.

The credulous person thus exists within the diegesis of this film, whose critics see credulity as a characteristic of its audiences. Interestingly, the film can be seen as addressing the anxiety caused by the acute and universal awareness of the presence of credulous people in the cinema audience. It does so by systematically disavowing transgressive actions and pre-censoring them, presenting them as parts of a masquerade: they either did not happen or were performed by the protagonist in disguise. There is an explicit prohibition of mimesis. These actions

are not to be performed by viewers at home or in public places, for that matter.

Phantom Viewer and Obsession with Indecent Objects

The controversy demonstrates that there is a gap between the film's spectator—its inscribed reader—and its audiences. It also draws attention to what this gap might produce. Paul Willemen argues,

> Texts can restrict readings (offer resistances), but they cannot determine them. They can hinder the productivity of the plurality of discourses at play in them, they can emphasise certain discourses as opposed to others (through repetition or other foregrounding devices). *But each of the participants in a textual practice may construct a reader and an author* (...) on the basis of a unification of actants and their amplification, their psychologisation into a fully constituted reader/author (1994: 77, emphasis added).

So, even as the text constructs its reader, actual readers simultaneously constructs a reader, who is supposed to read the text in particular ways. Our credulous viewer—he who enjoys obscenity—is one such reader who has been constructed by the actual viewers of the film.

Looking back at the *Alluda Majaka* controversy, it is possible to suggest that the gap between the spectator and the viewer is indeed an important one because, in the space of this gap, various phantom figures emerge. These are *created by audiences themselves but are thought to be produced by the cinema*. Be they the lower class viewers who are base enough to enjoy obscenity or the stranger (the unfamiliar male in Vijayalakshmi's interview), presences that cause embarrassment and even fear inevitably materialize at the cinema hall.

As pointed out above, a cross-section of viewers expressed the opinion that the film's addressee was someone other than himself or herself. Curiously, for a film that constructs a fan-spectator and also one that witnessed unprecedented fan mobilization in its support, *Alluda Majaka*, nevertheless, could not be explicitly owned as an object of pleasure by most Chiranjeevi fans without its supporters pointing to 'women' and 'families' in the audience. There were also a few fans I came across who admitted that the film was obscene. One important office bearer of the apex body of fans (not Swamy Naidu), said he did not like the film and also that the controversial sequences ought to have been censored. The only fan who stated that he liked the film and even listed it among his three favourite Chiranjeevi films was Vulisetty

Anjaneeyulu, the fan who stayed back in Hyderabad for months on end to meet Chiranjeevi (discussed in Chapter 1). He also said he did not understand what obscenity (*asleelata*, the word) meant.

Although the fan is an obvious candidate for being a member of the mass audience, my search for viewers, among fans, who actually liked the four sequences discussed above, revealed that in the real world, nobody 'likes' obscenity. Even the odd small town youth, who admitted to liking the film, was not adequately aware of what all the fuss was about. If he had known, perhaps he, too, would have come round to the view that he did not like the film after all. The addressee of obscenity, he who enjoys it, is always the other, eternally regressing, impossible to apprehend.

There is no overstating the status of the phantom audience as a by-product or accompaniment of disavowal. Vijayalakshmi's dedicated anti-obscenity campaigns have their fringe benefits. Her career throws light on the obsession of the 'decent' person with obscenity. She stated that she watched all obscene films *at least* twice and remembered each of these films, 'dialogue by dialogue'.

In terms of obsessive viewing of films, she is in direct competition with fans. And like fans' associations, her mode of engagement with the cinema not only includes making demands on films but also a carrying out a host of actions that extend well beyond film viewing itself, such as, for example, the raids on cinema halls.

Ravi Vasudevan's concept of 'cinephobia' is useful for me to conclude my discussion of obscenity and responses it generates. Vasudevan (1995) argues that the cinephobic response, 'amounts to a freezing of public identity within a specifically political set of demands articulated through lobbies addressed directly to the government and through the press' (p. 2). For Vasudevan cinephobia refers to

> [T]he paranoiac dimensions of the public eye, that opinion which fears that boundaries it seeks to build around itself are subject to penetration by the other space, the shadow domain in which images flit by on a screen; *incorporeal as these may be they are rematerialized in the audience and in the figures that surround this other space*. This knowing opinion, composed of the respectable, has a presentiment that this area lies beyond the social pale and may in fact constitute a realm of criminality, but also expresses the anxiety that the respectable may go over to the other side, a fear invariably projected around the destiny of children (1995: 3, emphasis added).

Vasudevan's analysis addresses a historically specific response (1913–43). Therefore, studies of cinema in other historical or cultural contexts need

to ask: *what* developments on screen (in the form of transformations of the filmic narrative) and off-screen (in society) give rise to responses that we may name as cinephobic?[17]

Vasudevan allows us to note the linkages between seemingly distinct but closely related anxieties of contamination/pollution by the other (who, let us not forget, is physically present within the cinema hall as the lower class/caste viewer); degeneration of the public sphere; criminalization of the masses, and corruption of children. As we saw earlier in this chapter, the socially mixed audience of the cinema, as well as, the mass film's rowdy are directly implicated in the cinephobic response to *Alluda Majaka*, in particular, and cinema, in general. The anxious response involves the articulation of political and moral anxieties arising from the state of 'society', as if these anxieties had their origin in a given set of filmic texts or the medium, in general.

However, given Metz and Vijayalakshmi, it may, in fact, be useful to see the cinephobic response as a mirror image—not the opposite—of cinephilia itself. The true cinephobe, as distinct from campaigners who are not particularly invested in the cinema and know that it is corrupt even without having to watch films, is a *fan in masquerade*, sublimating obsession with a good cause and, in the process, disowning the very object of obsession.

Conspiracy and the Cadreized Fan

Alluda Majaka marks an important turning point in Chiranjeevi's career and also in the history of the mass film. In the next chapter, I examine both the star and Telugu cinema post-*Alluda Majaka*. By way of transiting into that discussion, I will briefly note the significance of the controversy for fans' associations.

The lasting contribution of the controversy over the film was in bringing the thousands of associations across the state under a single apex body, the State Wide Chiranjeevi Youth Welfare Association. While attempts to centralize fans' associations were already under way by early 1995, it is doubtful if any progress was made in this direction till the rally in support of the film in April. The rally, itself, did not result in the central body's ability to control fan activity but it, nevertheless, proved to be a catalyst in the creation of an organizational structure that would become the basis for the star's political party over a decade later.

Much more than both NTR and Krishna, the other major Telugu stars in politics, months of fan mobilization and also organizational

revamping of the associations preceded Chiranjeevi's political entry. Chiranjeevi's younger brother Nagendra Babu, the honorary president of the Youth Welfare Association, toured the state extensively and held innumerable meetings with fan organizers. Academics and activists, alike, were invited to address the meetings widely attended by Chiranjeevi fans. But it is not merely as an inaugural moment of a new kind of fan mobilization, that the controversy assumes importance, it also reinforced the star's status as the rallying point for forces opposed to the then ruling party (TDP) and the caste that was closely identified with it (the Kammas). Regardless of Chiranjeevi's dominant position in the film industry, he could be seen as a rebel and victim even in 1995.

The organizers of the rally, including Swamy Naidu, firmly believed in and propagated a conspiracy theory. This theory demonstrated how the prevailing self-fashioning of the fan as the protector of the star's interests, could be put to use in a new kind of mobilization.

The conspiracy theory, reconstructed here from interviews with various sources that will remain unnamed, went like this: the Kammas, who controlled the film industry for decades, were afraid of the popularity of Chiranjeevi. As we all know, this self-made non-Kamma worked his way up from the bottom without the backing of big shots. The industry was now organizing itself around Chiranjeevi and thus the fiefdom of the Kammas was slipping out of their control. Powerful Kammas like Ch. Ramoji Rao, owner of the *Eenadu* group of publications; D. Ramanaidu, producer, studio owner, and father of Venkatesh, one of Chiranjeevi's 'rivals'; Mohan Babu, film star, producer and TDP MP; Ch. Vidyasagar Rao, floor leader of the BJP in the Assembly, etc. came together to destroy Chiranjeevi and re-establish the hold of Kammas over the industry. The Kammas also feared that Chiranjeevi's unchecked popularity would tempt him to enter politics and end the domination of Kammas (and Reddys) in politics.

Notably, this conspiracy theory is neither an invention of fans' associations nor is restricted to fan circles. Popular 'yellow' magazines, including the most authoritative source of industry gossip, *Tara Sitara*, have repeatedly presented Chiranjeevi (and also NTR Jr.) as victims of various conspiracies hatched by the rich and powerful.[18] With reference to the crisis at hand, there were facts that could be mobilized to 'prove' the theory. The first nasty review of *Alluda Majaka* appeared in the film magazine *Sitara*, which was a part of the *Eenadu* group. Immediately afterwards, both the TDP and BJP took up the issue. Ignorant, but otherwise innocent political activists and other busybodies, according to

this theory, played into the hands of the conspirators to see their names in the newspapers.

Public statements by fans during the controversy accuse 'intellectuals', 'politicians', and 'leaders' of making an issue of the film to gain publicity: 'this is a Chiranjeevi film and no matter what they [the critics of the film] say, they can become "popular" and see their names in the newspapers'.[19] The issue was not obscenity at all:

> Don't these big people [*pedda manushulu*] who want to ban *Alluda Majaka* know how terrible programmes are on Zee and STAR TV? ... If these people were really concerned about obscenity, they would have prevented English films like *Basic Instinct* from being screened ... (Akhilandhra Chiranjeevi Yuvatha 1995).

They went on name half-a-dozen 'obscene' films produced by Ramoji Rao and D. Ramanaidu, both producers (especially the former) associated with 'clean' middle-class cinema. *Alluda Majaka* on the other hand, was *not* obscene but was being targeted for dubious reasons. They offered to prove that the film was clean and in a characteristically hyperbolic manner stated:

> For almost sixty days, 250 theatres across the state have screened *Alluda Majaka*, which has received phenomenal support from the people ... Even if one woman hangs her head in shame after watching the film, we, Chiranjeevi fans, will hang ourselves there and then (Akhilandhra Chiranjeevi Yuvatha 1995).

The press-note begs the question: what was the *real* reason for raking up the controversy then, apart from gaining publicity? It left this unsaid because everyone concerned knew about the plot to defame Chiranjeevi. Being fans, it was their responsibility to protect him.

The fans, who were mobilized for the rally, did not, however, seem particularly interested in seeing through the transformation of fans' associations into organizations that required the sublimation of the excesses of fandom. The agenda-note of the office bearers of associations called by the Youth Welfare Association two years after the rally, notes that its flagship social service activities (tree planting and eye donation) did not even come close to meeting their targets (State Wide Chiranjeevi Youth Welfare Association 1997). This is not unexpected, given the history of fans' associations. But something had changed: it would become increasingly difficult for fans to remain indifferent to the call of social service. From the late 1990s, the Chiranjeevi fan would

be endowed with a mark of distinction: his fandom existed for a larger 'purpose'.

This sublimation, which is, in fact, disavowal of fandom itself, coincides or dovetails into another important development: the on-screen transformation of the star himself. In the next chapter, I examine the third phase of Chiranjeevi's career, when the screen rowdy is replaced by another kind of representative figure. It was, in part, a response to the felt need to clean up films and cinema halls, to tackle the menace of the phantom viewer who was, after all, engendered by the cinema. But that was not all there was to it. The phantom viewer was a part of a larger crisis in the mass film and the industry itself.

5

Remaking the Star to Make a Politician

Writing almost two years after the *Alluda Majaka* controversy, film critic Gudipoodi Srihari (1997) observed that Chiranjeevi had lost his female viewers due to some of his roles (he did not mention *Alluda Majaka*). Srihari went on to elaborate that women had been a significant part of the audience of his films in the past, and now, the star's career was back on track because women were back in cinema halls to see his latest film *Hitler* (1997: 12). Chiranjeevi's career graph was at its all time low in the mid-1990s. Srihari read into *Hitler* an attempt at an image makeover by the star and was satisfied that this was addressing a problem (of alienating female viewers) that he had himself drawn attention to earlier. Srihari proved to be right all over again. Doubts about Chiranjeevi's ability to retain his premier position were rapidly dispelled and the star continued to dominate the industry for another decade, even as a new generation of stars emerged.

In hindsight, it is possible for us to see that the movement of women in and out of cinema halls due to obscenity was, at best, a minor part of the problems that the Telugu film industry was experiencing around this time. To its credit, however, the industry resolved, or at least indefinitely deferred, the crisis and threw up a Chief Ministerial candidate as a bonus. In this chapter, I will examine the period between the crisis years (the mid-1990s) and 2008 (when Chiranjeevi announced his decision to contest the elections) to show how intimately the fate of the star was tied up with the state of the film industry and its flagship genre, the mass film. In establishing these connections between star, industry, and genre, my intention is to strengthen my case for returning

the discussion of the star-politician back to the cinema, but without reducing this to making one-to-one correspondences between film story and political intent.

Developments since the mid-1990s offer valuable insights into the specificity of the relationship between star, film industry, and filmic representation in Telugu cinema. I propose that the larger problem, of which the mid-career crisis of not just Chiranjeevi, but also that of his professional rival Balakrishna, is one of *blockage*. The film industry was confronted with a range of economic and aesthetic challenges, not the least of which was the rapid reduction of theatrical attendance and the rise to prominence of sites of film consumption like television and video, which had not been factored into the general scheme of things. Further, in spite of repeated warnings by insiders and successful experiments by sections within, something seemed to be holding the industry down to economic and representational models that were inherited from NTR's time. I provocatively named this phenomenon as the 'persistence of the feudal' in another context (Srinivas 2006b), but for reasons of focus I will not go into the discussion of peasants and feudalism in Telugu cinema. Chronologically speaking, we have, by this point in the book, arrived at the third and final phase of Chiranjeevi's career. I will first draw attention to the signs of what I am calling the blockage.

The Blockage

In order to understand the developments in Telugu cinema over the past decade or so, it is useful to compare them with Bollywoodization of Hindi cinema. To recall the discussion of Rajadhyaksha's notion (2003) in a previous chapter, Bollywoodization is, among other things, the attempt to 'define culture economically' (p. 31), or, to translate cultural worth of film into economic value. Around the time when sections of the Bombay (now Mumbai) film industry began to explore new markets and marketing possibilities that would, in the years to come, facilitate the Bollywoodization of Hindi cinema, Telugu cinema struggled to overcome an obstacle, which was variously named as the dearth of original stories, lack of planning, unusable stars, etc., that industry observers argued was directly responsible for a major crisis at hand. In films from the mid-1990s we notice signs of change but also textual inscriptions of a blockage, a something that resists. In hindsight, we can see that the resistance effectively deferred, if not prevented outright, the transition into a new narrative regime and an economic one that corresponded to it. In the section below, I will outline three

textual manifestations of the blockage before moving on to how the mass film and Chiranjeevi are directly implicated in the resistance to regime change. What is most interesting is the manner in which film after film of this period is *structured* around the blockage.

The first, and the most obvious, manifestation of the blockage is at the level of film story. In a number of individual films, the representational front-end of the industry, as it were, we begin to notice the co-existence of a display of *contemporaneity*, effected by making strikingly visible digressions from familiar locations/generic conventions, with the surfacing of a story level threat posed by something from the past. This threat is often located in a specific geographical location (the village, a particular region of the state, the old city of Hyderabad). Lovers cannot be united, the extended family's enjoyment cannot go on, college students cannot have their charming and harmless gang wars peacefully, and so on, because of the surfacing of this thing from the past.

A second manifestation of the blockage is at the level of genre and/or film form. Films that apparently begin in right earnest as 'genre films' of the post-Ram Gopal Varma variety, make a return to the familiar melodramatic idiom founded on tropes of lost and found family members, revenge motifs, etc. By way of clarifying the specificity of the issue at hand, I would like to point out that the domestication of genre films of the Hollywood or Hong Kong variety through their remodelling into familiar filmic forms, is a banal occurrence in most Indian film industries. For example, in NTR's *Superman* (V. Madhusudhan Rao 1980), the hero gets his magical powers from Lord Hanuman. Moreover, apart from his costume and flying skills, the hero is indistinguishable from other characters the star played in this period. The contrast case is the work of Ram Gopal Varma, in Telugu and Hindi, which makes a clean break with the received mode of appropriating just one or two elements from imported genres to prop up what is essentially an indigenous form (which, too, is of course not free of borrowings from other industries or cultural forms, as we have seen with Chiranjeevi's work). Post-Varma and Mani Rathnam, we notice a more or less complete transition into genre films, even if these films display interesting degrees of difference from their equivalents in non-Indian industries. While this trend is more noticeable in Hindi, an increasing number of Telugu films, too, are being deliberately positioned as genre films (notably suspense thrillers, an example of which would be *A Film by Arvind*, Sekhar Suri 2005). I return to the genre question in detail below, but for now, I will stay with my blockage argument. Unlike in the 1970s

and 1980s, the familiar melodramatic structuring of the story—or the possibility of returning to what is disavowed by the turn to 'genre'—is not always declared at the very outset and is instead *staged as a revelation* well into the film, even its very end. We, therefore, get the impression that the film's progress is effectively arrested by precisely the extant conventions that it was trying to skirt around. This impossibility of movement has a story level manifestation in the characters' return to the place of origin—from exotic or unfamiliar locations. In *Indra* for example, our hero goes all the way to Varanasi but has to return to his 'native' Rayalaseema to deal with a family feud that is many generations old.

Experimentation, or deviance from the familiar, thus, has to be restricted to the delay, rather than a total rejection, of the dominant idiom. Thus, even as the story stages the return of, and to, the past and to the place of origin, the film in question reveals itself to be a variant of the mass film, itself.

The third, and for our purposes the most important, manifestation of the blockage, is the inability of the major stars, especially Chiranjeevi and Balakrishna, to free themselves from what critics call the *imagi chatram*. The phrase literally means the 'image's frame' and refers to the bind of the screen image that the star has, himself, painstakingly cultivated over the decades. In Chapter 1, I drew attention to how invested fans were, in the screen image of their favourite star and their extreme responses to perceived threats to it. From the 1990s, there has been a widespread and eminently defensible perception among film critics that it was not only credulous spectators but also stars who were caught in, what Pandian (1992) so elegantly termed, the *image trap*. Indeed, in the light of the serious difficulties most major Telugu stars experienced over the years—including their inability to move beyond certain set roles and, of course, their inability to die on screen—we need to renew our conceptualization of the image trap and see it as a problem primarily of *stars*. I note in passing that the Telugu film industry's biggest contribution to its Bombay counterpart (after Sridevi), Ram Gopal Varma, could not make a film with Chiranjeevi in the late 1990s. There were unconfirmed rumours that this was due to a disagreement between the director and the star about the story. Chiranjeevi himself stated that Varma postponed the project and then became unavailable (*Sivaranjani*, 28 August 1997, Centre Spread). Both Varma and Chiranjeevi expressed their desire to work together at a future date. However, the genre films that Varma was already making in Telugu and would take with

him to Bombay, could not possibly work with Chiranjeevi. Between them, these two individuals represented two different tendencies in the industry. Varma's oeuvre was precisely what the mass film was trying to resist.

In the sections below, I will discuss Chiranjeevi's career in the context of this productive period of stasis, which eventually re-established the star and also brought the mass film back into business. For the sake of convenience, I will discuss these developments under the broad heading of the *decline and revival of the mass film*. Let me begin by asking, what did the decline of the mass film mean?

Decline of the Mass Film

There can be no doubt that, in the mid-1990s, Chiranjeevi's career was at its lowest, with the star's films repeatedly performing poorly at the box office from 1993. Between *Mutha Mestri* (1993) and *Hitler* (1997), the only hit he had was *Alluda Majaka* (1995) and critics even disputed the extent of this film's success. In 1996, not a single Chiranjeevi film was released. But it was not Chiranjeevi, alone, who had hit a rough patch. Balakrishna's films were doing equally badly. The career graphs of both stars was an indication of the inability of the mass film to continue functioning as the masthead of the industry. The only exception to the overall trend was the feudal nostalgia variant of the mass film, which resulted in successful remakes of Tamil hits such as *Pedarayudu* (Ravi Raja Pinisetti 1995) and later *Suryavamsam* (Bhimaneni Srinivas Rao 1998).

The issue at hand, let me suggest, was not that a particular form/genre had stopped returning profits. It was not even the discovery that the industry biggest stars were unable to deliver hits. The Telugu film industry was, like most other Indian film industries, historically founded on an economic model that *did not require films to make profits at the box office*. It was the ability of the industry to attract surpluses generated in other fields (agriculture, trade, and the black economy) that ensured the survival of an otherwise loss making production sector. To make a rather sweeping but defensible generalization, in any given year from the early 1940s, if not even earlier, a majority of Telugu films did not recover their (production, distribution, and exhibition) costs. An early indication of the shape of things to come, can be seen in an essay by the director Gudavalli Ramabrahmam (1940: 95) who notes that of the fifteen films made in the previous year (1939) only a couple made a profit, while a few may have recovered their costs. Of the twelve films

made in 1940, an observer writing under the name of Raraju noted a year later, only three made a profit, broke even, or hoped to break even in the months to come. Most cinema halls in the Andhra region, too, made a loss in this year (Raraju 1941).[1]

The situation is unlikely to have been very different for other language cinemas, too. Students of Indian cinema have drawn attention to the role played by the exhibition sector in attracting locally generated surplus. Valentina Vitali has the following point to make about the Bombay film industry:

> Whereas production and distribution remained highly fragmented sectors, by the 1960s exhibition had grown into a cohesive force that tended, however, to mobilise local regional capital. That the Indian film industry's locomotive was then and remains today the exhibition sector, is crucial for an understanding of the socio-economic fabric that buttresses Indian films both as commodities and as discursive fields of Indian national configuration (2006: 269).

Post 1970s, the model of stardom that both NTR and Krishna helped assemble, ensured that increasing amounts of money flowed into the production sector from a rapidly expanding *distribution network*. K. Narasaiah (1981) argues that the key development in the 1970s was what he calls the decentralization (*vikendrikarana*) of the film industry, especially the distribution sector (p. 145). I will modify this somewhat, and suggest that Narasaiah is, in fact, talking about fragmentation, which is Vitali's larger point, too, if we set aside the question of the time line of fragmentation and its consequences. The difference, however, between the two industries seems to be that paradoxically—and this is Narasaiah's central claim—fragmentation resulted in rapid growth of the Telugu film industry. It did so by bringing in vast quantities of investments into it. There was also a regional dimension to the expansion of the distribution sector. Growth was most rapid in smaller cities and Hyderabad. In Vijayawada, which was the traditional centre for film distribution and the largest for Telugu after Madras, even in the 1960s, distribution offices came down from 100 to 77. In the corresponding period, the figure for Hyderabad reached 125. Distribution companies also sprang up in a number of other towns in coastal Andhra (pp. 145–6). I will note in passing that in the mid-1990s there were 193 and 243 distribution offices in Vijayawada and Hyderabad respectively (*Andhra Pradesh Film Diary 1995*).

The mass film ensured that there was a further consolidation of this economic model, which, as I have tried to show in the earlier chapters, is also an *aesthetic* model. The aesthetic model is characterized by the

foregrounding of the presence of the star in the fiction, because he is, after all, the chief attraction of the film at the viewer end, and, most critically, the central value addition at the business end. The mass film's production was founded on a complex mechanism of *risk management* in which the producer emerged 'safe' by pre-selling his product to buyers, who would bid for a film that was not yet complete. This bidding was done by paying advances which were, in turn, collected from either smaller sub-distributors or exhibitors. A failure would, then, mean that the entry-level investor (the sub-distributor or at times the exhibitor) lost money. As Srihari notes, there was a high turnover of distributors with new players constantly entering the industry and some existing ones closing shop (1986: 85).

In the late 1990s, when attempts at a qualified return to the mass film's economics were being made, producer Aswini Dutt provided valuable information on the nature of the problem with the system prevailing till the mid-1990s. In an interview with the film magazine *Super Hit* (25 September 1998), Dutt claimed that *Choodalani Vundi* was among the biggest hits in the history of the industry. He went on to add, '*I created a new trend through this film* [English]. I made distributors partners of the film. … I gave the film to distributors on the minimum guarantee basis.[2] Mine is the first attempt of its kind after the arrival of the slab system …. *After the arrival of the slab system, the minimum guarantee system was wiped out* …. (emphasis added)' Glossing over the past practice of producers like himself, who were making mass films with the biggest stars, he went on to advice the rest of his trade:

> The producer should not merely produce films with stars and sell them at fancy rates. Till the very end he should feel that the film's release too is in his account.[3] Only when films are made in this manner will the quality and cost consciousness increase. There will be an increase in the awareness and desire to make the film better …. However, if the minimum guarantee system is to grow, the distributor's genuineness should increase. His accounting should be correct …. As for the success of *Choodalani Vundi*, I feel that in addition to Chiranjeevi's image, the making quality of the film too has been an important factor (1998).

Aswini Dutt's comments allow us to see, in a capsulated form, the economic history of the film industry since the arrival of the slab system: the increased risk faced by distributors, the benefits accruing to producers, and the rising prominence of the star. We can also see from Dutt's point about the need for the distributor's 'genuineness',' that a return to the minimum guarantee system was not easy because

distributors tended to under-report box office takings, which was, in fact, one of the chief administrative reasons for the introduction of the slab system. However, what is important is that major producers like Dutt, among the biggest beneficiaries of the mass film's production model, were now rethinking their strategies. The most striking evidence of the new thinking in the industry is the apparently innocuous comment about the quality of the film, suggesting that it was now possible to see the star as, but one, even if the most important, element that goes into the production of a big budget film.

As for the mass film, then, for just over a decade, the genre was successful in holding together the NTR model of stardom resulting in the huge growth of the production sector that sometimes overtook Hindi, in number. In the 1990s, a complex set of aesthetic and economic crises shook up the film industry, disrupting the equilibrium. Dutt's statements become more meaningful when we note the observation made by Gudipoodi Srihari some years earlier on the state of the industry (1992). Srihari alerts us to the fact that, almost through its history, the mass film was a genre in and of a crisis-ridden industry. The economic model it helped sustain generated substantial losses, even resulting in periods of slump in production. In Srihari's words:

> The slab system adopted by Andhra Pradesh [government] in the collection of entertainment tax is a blessing in disguise for successful films, while it is a curse for the films [of] average and below average run. The buying system in the industry put some of the producers in the bracket of safe producers *because of the business they make right at the initial stage of film production*. But as films started flopping in the commercial market in the middle of the year, this buying spree has slowed down with the result the number of releases also has dropped to the extent [that] at the close of the year [1988] hardly half a dozen films were released, compared to the release of two films a week in an average, generally. Because of this attitude of the buyers going in for big star cast films which are sure of openings when the slab system would benefit them, the producers developed a tendency, according to film [industry] sources of just finishing it hurriedly giving no respect for quality … . The slump last year [1988] was itself a great blow but now from all indications and the observations of the film industrialists it is again to crash soon unless proper steps are taken for its resurrection because quite a few films are locked up in boxes at Madras [the production centre till the mid-1990s] for lack of buyers because they are afraid of paying money in these circumstances (1992: 4, emphasis added).

In 1991, a film trade magazine wondered if there would be a 50 per cent fall in the number of productions in that year (*Cinema Trade Guide Patrika* 1991: 1).

Till the mid-1990s, the general state of the production sector and its frequent slumps did not directly affect the biggest stars. They continued to demand higher rates of remuneration and feature in even bigger projects. The mass film's crisis in the mid-1990s was the increasingly widespread questioning of its economic model in industry circles, a criticism which found a resonance in attacks on the form and aesthetics of the genre in film journalism's condemnations of the formula film, *imagi chatram* of stars, obscenity, etc. The dominant industrial model, in place since the late 1970s, was never subjected to the severity of questioning that it was in the mid-1990s.

I suggest that the biggest problem of the mid-1990s may have been the *fragmentation of the film market* along three axes: genre, region, and format (or sites of consumption).[4]

Axes of Fragmentation

The first axis is along audience composition, which implicated genre discussions in direct and interesting ways. From the late 1980s, post-Ram Gopal Varma and Mani Rathnam, new genres became increasingly popular.[5] Audience segments are no doubt fuzzy and claims on their behalf are often founded on social stereotypes. However, we need to note that there was a widespread *perception* that the ensemble of filmic components (song, fight, comedy track, etc.) which were hitherto thought of as catering to the tastes of different segments of the audience (the cabaret dance for the masses, sentiment for the ladies, etc.) were no longer holding the totality of the market together. Instead, the new argument was that, because of their high economic worth, certain segments had to be addressed separately. Assembling a different kind of film, and not altering or adding a component to the ensemble, was seen as the only way to accomplish this. Some industry observers began to argue that the big budget star vehicle (mass film) was a white elephant because various categories of audiences, including women, families, and youth had abandoned it.

The second axis is of regional segmentation, which, too, had a genre dimension. In the 1990s, Telangana emerged as a separate market segment. According to Narasaiah (1981), film market in this region had grown much faster than the rest of the state through the 1970s. Regional differences till the 1990s were limited to the respective size of the regions' market for Telugu cinema or the relatively greater preference in Telangana for Hindi films. Furthermore, till this point, the USP of major stars and the mass film was that they had an appeal across the state.

Even now this was not really in question and no one was saying that major stars were *unacceptable* to viewers of this region. However, with the mass film and its stars in crisis, there was adequate ground to take seriously the possibility of regional markets within Andhra Pradesh.

Curiously, it was the hitherto obscure and marginal Naxalite film, which caused the disruption even before Telangana returned to the centre-stage of the state's politics, after the formation of the Telangana Rashtra Samiti in 2002. The Naxalite film is largely a consequence of the incredible tenacity of one man, R. Narayana Murthy, who began his career in the early 1980s low budget films as an actor and assistant director (Murari [nd]: 270–3). He was the lead actor, director, and producer of over a dozen films of the genre, which he invented in the late 1980s.

Unlike other genres in Telugu cinema, the Naxalite film began as a *regional genre*, rather than end up with a geographically limited market. It established itself first in the Telangana region for a number of obvious reasons. These include its overt references to the Naxalite movement, which, over the decades has come to be identified with this region. Even the less successful 1990s films of Narayana Murthy, apparently, either broke even, or earned modest profits in Telangana (*Jyothichitra*, 4 December 1998: 18). Most of Narayana Murthy's films are shot in coastal Andhra and use the Telangana dialect inconsistently, but none of this really mattered for their spread in Telangana. The genre's adaptation of the cultural idiom of Jana Natya Mandali, the cultural wing of the CPI (ML) People's War (now CPI [Maoist]), contributed to its popularity.

With the Naxalite film there emerged the possibility of making films targeting a particular region.[6] The industry's interest in the Naxalite film was a sign of the times and points to the general sense of crisis prevailing then. The desperate hunt for new forms/formulae/stars was the fallout of the failure of mass film.

The phenomenal success of *Erra Sainyam* (R. Narayana Murthy 1995) marks a critical development. This film was distributed across the state because the conditions were ripe for a film of this kind to be picked up by the distribution sector on the lookout for 'safe' investments where losses, if any, would be small. Till this point of time, R. Narayana Murthy and his genre were a marginal presence as far as the production sector was concerned. After *Erra Sainyam*, the production sector took notice of both. Narayana Murthy was immediately cast in films directed and produced by others. The 'others' included his mentor Dasari Narayana

Rao, who produced and directed Murthy in *Orey Rickshaw*, one of the biggest hits of 1996. The industry then went on to produce films with other stars like Krishna, Mohan Babu, Vijayashanti, etc.

Osey Ramulamma (Dasari Narayana Rao 1997) was produced as a part of the effort at mainstreaming the Naxalite film. It featured Vijayashanti in the lead and cast Krishna in a guest role. Dasari himself played a revolutionary singer who was clearly modelled on the poet/singer Gaddar of the Jana Natya Mandali. The director has repeatedly claimed that the film was the biggest hit of the Telugu film industry. It did well across the state but its success in Telangana was phenomenal. There were stories in the film press of villagers in this region hiring tractors and trucks to travel to distant cinema halls screening the film. Vijayashanti herself went on to become a major star in the region. In a clever marketing move, the film's unit toured Telangana extensively. Vijayashanti was clearly the centre of this tour, which witnessed the gathering of enormous crowds rivalling those that the biggest male stars attract.[7]

Narayana Murthy's films, as well as *Osey Ramulamma,* demonstrated in their own ways the geographical fault-lines in the film market. No Naxalite film bettered *Osey Ramulamma*'s collections and in the following years the industry returned the genre back to Narayana Murthy, after a string of flops. Around the same time, the mass film made a major comeback, and, by the late 1990s, both the big stars, Chiranjeevi and Balakrishna were back in business. Before that discussion, a note on the last axis of fragmentation.

Only a few years earlier, the mass film seemed to guarantee returns for the production sector. The mid-1990s segmentation of the market, came with declining viewership of the cinema, in general, and a major collapse of the exhibition sector resulting in the closure of hundreds of cinema halls over the next ten years.[8] The third axis of segmentation proved (and proves) to be the most difficult one for the industry to handle. For the first time since the cinema arrived in this part of the world, this entertainment form witnessed a gross decline in theatrical attendance. The extent of the decline is not known but the shrinkage of the exhibition sector gives some indication of its scale, and only the constant rise in ticket prices cushioned the fall for the sector.

Reduction in cinema halls notwithstanding, it is useful to see the new context as one of segmentation, rather than an absolute loss of audience, because there was, in fact, an increased viewership of movies in other formats (television, video, and later optical disc). This became

clear as Telugu language cable and satellite television channels began to telecast up to three movies per day per channel. The 1990s obscenity discussion, too, in a manner of speaking, was an anxious response to the sharp increase of film viewing on the small screen, which gave the opponents of obscenity the impression that bad cinema was exploding into the public domain. The participants in anti-obscenity campaigns, in fact, made repeated references to the growth of television as a source of concern.

The problem, however, was that the industry did not know how to deal with this explosion. While industry representatives chanted slogans against piracy, individual film producers sold television rights of their films for shockingly low amounts to Telugu satellite television channels. Till a few years ago, Gemini Television, owned by the Sun Television network, routinely acquired satellite rights in exchange for advertising slots, with no cash changing hands at all.[9] An official of Maa TV, a channel that was a relative newcomer to the business and had to compete with television channels owned by the Eenadu group and Sun TV network, pointed out that, till his channel arrived on the scene, film rights—especially of older films or those that did not feature major stars—were acquired for next to nothing.[10]

This is not the only sign of the film industry's inability to deal with emerging market segments. Through the 1990s, the industry often acknowledged the huge growth of the music industry but merely saw music sales as a means of bringing audience, into the cinema hall. What was, in fact, happening was the dispersal of the cinema—or rather its components—beyond the cinema hall into circuits of consumption that did not necessarily return consumers to the cinema hall.

It was not as if money stopped flowing into the industry through distribution networks. But the distribution sector's spectacular losses were forcing investors to look beyond the mass film and the big Telugu stars, in general. The mid-1990s crisis affected low budget films produced in Telugu too.[11] The state of affairs is reflected in an increased number of dubbed films being released in 1994 (62 of them), including films dubbed many years earlier but lying in cans due to the lack of distributors. The overall scenario, summarized as follows by one report: government subsidies, now at Rs 5,00,000 per film, resulted in a huge spurt in productions, which were, nevertheless, of low 'worth' because most of them could not run beyond two weeks. There was, therefore, the paradoxical situation of a record number of productions proving inadequate to feed cinema halls. Dubbing became the means by which

cinema halls were supplied with films. Two films dubbed from Tamil *Basha* (Suresh Krissna 1994) and *Premikudu* (Shankar 1994) had hundred days runs in a number of cinema halls across the state (culled from *Sivaranjani* 1995).

Simultaneously, among the hits originally produced in Telugu, were films from relatively obscure genres, made with low budgets, and/or unknown stars. In 1995, there were a total of 124 releases, including 50 films dubbed from other languages. Only one mass film was a major hit (*Pedarayudu*), while some of the other successful mass films include (*Gharana Bullodu*, K. Raghavendra Rao, featuring Nagarjuna) and *Alluda Majaka*. Other hits included Naxalite films (*Orey Rickshaw*, Dasari Narayana Rao and *Cheemala Dandu*, R. Narayana Murthy), low budget romances (*Tajmahal*, Muppalaneni Siva) and the devotional film *Ammoru* (Kodi Ramakrishna). Among other successes of the year were a socio-fantasy (*Ghatothkachudu*, S.V. Krishna Reddy) featuring the comedian Ali in the lead, and *Sisindri* (Siva Nageswara Rao) featuring Nagarjuna's nine-month old son Nikhil in an important role. About 50 per cent of all films, including those featuring top stars, did not make a profit at the box office (M.V.S. 1996: 53–5). Only one in about six films produced in the year could be classified as hits (Lata 1996: 63–6). But this was definitely not news for an industry that had grown in spite of its box office failures. The new development was the emergence of alternate models that addressed the various axes of disintegration of the film market. The trend of mass film and its stars being overtaken by low budget films and less knows actors would continue through the rest of the 1990s, leading some of the biggest players in the production sector, including D. Ramanaidu and Ch. Ramoji Rao, to begin serial production of low budget films (discussed below).

The new avatars of the mass film, including the Chiranjeevi starrers I discuss later in this chapter, are integrationist, in that they target the totality of the film market—all regions and categories of viewers. Therefore, it is only *inter-alia* that the ladies problem, Chiranjeevi was allegedly facing, becomes significant.

Remembering the Class Film

The newness of the problem facing the industry is evident from the more or less complete collapse of the class film around this time. Just as the mass film stood at the apex of an economic-aesthetic model that was founded on stars, the class film was the exemplar of a complementary model, its mirror opposite. The class film was associated with superior

aesthetic quality, low budgets, its middle class audience base, sense of 'purpose' (read pedagogic intent), and reliance on actoral abilities rather than stardom. The class film's relevance to my discussion of Chiranjeevi lies not only in his being the only major star of the 1990s to have a close association with the genre, but also to understand better the kind of image problem the star was faced with. Furthermore, Chiranjeevi's association with the class film has repeatedly been cited as a sign of his distinction and superiority even as the class film itself was showcased to condemn his 'mass' or rowdy roles. In short, the production of Chiranjeevi as everybody's man, had something to do with his class film appearances, not just his roles as the transcendental rowdy-citizen.

The origins of the class film can be traced back to *Thene Manasulu* (Adurthi Subba Rao 1965), a film that received much pre-release publicity due to the director's attempt to work with new actors in a film which promised to be aesthetically superior. Adurthi Subba Rao was, by this time, a sought after director who was closely associated with ANR. Rajadhyaksha and Willemen (1999: 386) point out that this film was a part of a series of films that the director co-produced with ANR over the next few years. From a contemporary report, it becomes clear that a section of the industry had by then begun to invest in minor or unknown actors to make low budget films distinguished by their aesthetic quality, *to broaden the base of the production section*. Adurthi staked his reputation in an 'experiment' that was meant to introduce a new crop of actors who could be cast in future productions. It was reported that, even while the film was under production, many rich people (*dhanikulu*) were eagerly awaiting its release to figure how much of the new talent would be useful (*paniki vastundi*) as an investment vehicle (Madras Representative 1964: 29).

While increasing numbers of low budget films began to be made every year since the 1960s, a specific category, at once middle-brow and avowedly committed to quality, would come to be known, in the years as the 'class film'. *Thene Manasulu*'s experiment with off-beat subjects, deglamourized actors, and realist presentation was repeated in *Saakshi* (Bapu 1967), which, too, cast Krishna but also introduced Bapu, who would go on to become one of the leading directors of the class film. Soon K. Vishwanath, who had assisted Adurthi, would begin his career as a director. His early films were critically acclaimed but they were not thought of as belonging to a distinct aesthetic/political category.

The class film as a label acquired prominence around the time when mass film emerged as a generic category, but by the time of *Sankarabharanam* (K. Vishwanath 1979), everyone seemed to know what the term 'class film' referred to. After *Sankarabharanam*, it became possible to speak of the class film as a genre with a cinematic history that was, of course, recreated in hindsight. The crop of directors who became identified with the class film includes K. Vishwanath (*Siri Siri Muvva* 1976, *Sagara Sangamam* 1983, *Swarnakamalam* 1988, and *Sutradharulu* 1990), Bapu (*Andala Ramudu* 1973, *Mutyala Muggu* 1976, and *Vamsa Vriksham* 1980), and Jandhyala (*Ananda Bhairavi* 1983). The class film stood out for its *nativity*, a film industry concept that has nothing to do with the birth of Jesus Christ and, instead, means 'nativeness' or Teluguness, that is, the natural qualities of a linguistically defined culture.[12] The nativity in the class film was, among other things, linked to location shooting in rural Andhra Pradesh, which was in fact the standard practice for low budget films, but it now acquired additional aesthetic value. Bapu's *Mutyala Muggu* (1976), is a particularly good example of 1970s nativity, with its completely deglamourized actors, storyline drawn from the *Ramayana*, set partly on the banks of the river Godavari, and featuring a villain speaking in (North Coastal Andhra) dialect. In contrast, a large number of big budget productions were shot in studios in Madras till the 1990s.

The class film has always been an integral part of the film industry. The genre retains the song and dance and fight sequences and its directors were not only respected but also considered commercially viable, albeit on economies of scale that were much smaller than the average star vehicle. Although most class films were made with modest budgets, it was not unusual for them to become major box office hits (*Siri Siri Muvva*, *Mutyala Muggu*, *Sankarabharanam*, and *Sagara Sangamam*).

Chiranjeevi began his career in low budget productions. As was only to be expected, he was soon 'discovered' by Bapu (*Manavuri Pandavulu* 1978), who was working with new or less known actors. He went on to feature in other films, which we may today categorize as class films including *Subhalekha* (1982) and *Manchupallaki* (1982). For some years after *Khaidi,* he was cast in roles that were quite distant from the ones he played in his early career. However, in 1987 when it was becoming increasingly clear that he was the most promising star of his generation, he returned to the form with which he can be said to have begun his career, except that it was now being called the class film and had acquired considerable distinction.

Over the next five years, he acted in two more, even producing one of them. These films are: *Swayamkrushi* (1987), *Rudraveena* (1988, produced by the star's brother Nagendra Babu), and *Aapadbandhavudu* (1992). The films are unlikely to have lost money because they were made on modest budgets and widely distributed but, as we saw in an earlier chapter, caused heartburn among some fans, even as they became the official favourites of others. The films won the star much critical acclaim and marked him as distinct: he, alone, was an acting star in the Telugu industry. He won the state government's award for Best Actor in *Swayamkrushi* and *Aapadbandhavudu*. *Rudraveena*, won the Nargis Dutt Award for National Integration. Like his fans, who inevitably include a couple of class films in their list of favourites, Chiranjeevi, too, includes *Swayamkrushi* and *Rudraveena*, in the top ten of his own films (Srikanth Kumar 2004: 229).

Sankarabharanam, a film that revolved around a Carnatic musician, enabled a long-term association between the genre and traditional arts, both classical and folk, which would be showcased in a number of class films, from this point onwards.[13] *Aapadbandhavudu* and *Sutradharulu,* for example, feature folk performers in central roles, while promotion of classical dance/musical forms became a major focus of *Sagara Sangamam* (starring Kamal Haasan), *Ananda Bhairavi*, *Rudraveena*, and *Swarnakamalam* (starring Venkatesh).

Throughout its history, the Telugu class film featured major stars including ANR (*Andala Ramudu, Megha Sandesam*, Dasari Narayana Rao 1982, and *Sutradharulu*) and Kamal Haasan. But the relationship of Chiranjeevi to the class film is indeed special, both for the star and the genre. The deployment of Chiranjeevi, the leading star of the industry in the prime of his career, in a genre that was already committed to the vintage nationalist position on culture, with its promotion of 'our tradition' in the face of the onslaught of crass westernized culture, facilitated the genre's framing of its aesthetic concerns in terms of a dialectical opposition to popular cinema, in general, and the mass film, in particular.

This was a fascinating manoeuvre, one that required the star to cross over genres, to disavow everything that he was doing in the mass film. In doing so, the star would reach the market segment that was being addressed by the class film. And, such a move would constitute the core of the reformist claims made by the genre. Further, the star's presence in the class film would ensure that the genre operated on the economies of scale and speculation of the mass film, with buyers picking up the star's

class film before its production and releasing it in hundreds of cinema halls across the state. Hence, it is best not to assume that these genres represent opposing tendencies.

In the class film, Chiranjeevi played strikingly deglamourized roles. In *Swayamkrushi* and *Aapadbandhavudu,* he plays the roles of lower class characters who are clearly identifiable by virtue of their occupations, as belonging to lower castes. In *Swayamkrushi,* he plays Sambaiah, a roadside cobbler who grows wealthy by virtue of his own hard work (*swayamkrushi*). He is, however, spurned by his motherless nephew, Chinna, for whose wellbeing he and his wife Ganga (Vijayashanti) devote their lives, with the latter even undergoing tubectomy so that she can devote all her attention to him. The nephew is misled by his biological father Govindu (played by the screen villain Charan Raj), and 'taught' to smoke and drink. After much heartache to the lead couple, the family is reconciled when Chinna finally realizes that Sambaiah is his real father. Interestingly, the reunion of Chinna with his (foster) parents, Sambaiah and Ganga, is accompanied by a rejection of wealth (by all three) and a return to the caste occupation. The final sequence of the film depicts Chinna and Sambaiah sitting on opposite sides of the road with their tools.

In *Aapadbandhavudu*, Chiranjeevi is Madhava, an illiterate milkman (yet another caste occupation) who is eternally loyal to an upper caste teacher (Jandhyala), and even calls him *Babugaru* (master), for no reason other than his deep sense of respect for learning. On two occasions, he gives up his means of livelihood for the master. First, when he helps him financially for his daughter's wedding, and second, when he takes on the task of publishing the old man's writings. The master dies and his younger daughter Hema (Meenakshi Seshadri) falls in love with Madhava, but the latter tries to get her married to her cousin, threatening to commit suicide when she proposes to him. In the latter part of the film, Hema is admitted into a mental asylum and Madhava follows her there, feigning madness. He protects her against sexual assault inside the asylum, undergoing severe torture and almost losing his own sanity in the bargain. The film ends with well wishers persuading Madhava to marry her.

Rudraveena too, is centrally concerned with questions of caste, but its reformist agenda is much more explicit. For this reason, it needs to be discussed separately from the other two films, although, it was made soon after *Swayamkrushi*. Chiranjeevi is Suryam, the son of Ganapathi Sastry (Gemini Ganesan), a Brahmin Carnatic musician. The film

revolves around the conflict between father and son, with the latter insisting that music should have a social purpose. Suryam falls in love with Lalitha (Shobana), a Dalit girl and, with her help, begins an anti-liquor campaign. By the end of the film, his developmental activities earn Suryam the 'Young Man of the Decade' award, from the Prime Minister himself. He is also reconciled with his father, who realizes that music has to serve society. The film's narrative is structured in a series of flashbacks, as Suryam tells his story to the local Member of Parliament (Satyanarayana). We are returned to the present only towards the very end of the film, when the MP publicizes Suryam's developmental activities, that results in the presentation of the award.

Around the time that Chiranjeevi became associated with it for the second time, the class film had fashioned itself as a critique of popular cinema, in general, implicating the mass film and its stars in rather direct ways. The class film positions itself as the site for addressing the lacunae of the mass film, and in the process produces the latter as being defined by a variety of absences. The class film also compensates virtually every notable absence that was being attributed to the mass film—from actoral abilities of its stars to social purposefulness, artistic values, and wholesome entertainment. By way of illustrating the relationship of the class film with its mirror opposite, the mass film, I cite a few example of how the formulaic elements of the latter, figure in the former.

Although all the three Chiranjeevi class films have fight sequences, they simultaneously present this essential ingredient of popular cinema as a pleasure of a lower order, and also suggest that violence has no role to play in the didacticism of the genre. Fights repeatedly fail to solve problems: villains like Govindu remain unrepentant even after many rounds of thrashing in *Swayamkrushi*. In *Aapadbandhavudu,* the fights are comic, 'unnecessary' (except for the last two which are in defence of Hema). However, it is in *Rudraveena*, that the rejection of the fight sequence and what it accomplishes, at the story level, are most unambiguous.

Soon after leaving his father's home, Suryam goes to the local arrack shop and pleads with the drunks to stop, for the sake of their families. They ridicule him and even beat him up. On the following day, he returns saying he can speak in their language too, thrashes them and warns them to stop drinking. This is the lone fight sequence in the film. Soon afterwards, Suryam and Lalitha go on to do something of an analysis of the fight and come to the realization that the poor will not stop drinking just because they have been beaten up. It is as if they

are reminding the spectator that this may have been possible in another *genre*, but not here in the class film. So, the couple have to go through the painful process of educating the masses. The denial of the political utility of violence and the spectatorial pleasure of the fight, is typical of the class film's disavowal of various elements of popular cinema, including stars themselves. Even as it borrows these elements, their utility and legitimacy is questioned. Worth or value is redefined by the deployment of the star and everything else he is associated with, in another kind of cinema, where pleasure is a pedagogic tool. Or, to put it differently, didactic intent legitimizes the basest elements of cinema by reassuring the class film's spectator that these are someone else's.

A sequence in *Rudraveena*, illustrates how reform of society and cinema is achieved by recasting the star. This film makes an overt reference to the existence of fans' associations, thus, anticipating the tendency of the mass film to do so in the 1990s. But, more importantly, it inaugurates the identification of meaning and purpose in fan activity, which would, in turn, characterize the star's response to his fans in the years to come. *Megastar Chiranjeevi* was launched about a year after *Rudraveena*'s release.

The public function, in which the Prime Minister presents Suryam with the 'Young Man of the Decade' award, is held at the village temple before an enormous gathering of people. The meeting retains many features of the pro-filmic spectacle, which is, after all, a gathering of the star's *fans*. Giant cut-outs of Chiranjeevi are displayed prominently at the venue of the meeting, while cloth banners praising Suryam make the token gesture of anchoring this display of Chiranjeevi's stardom to the fiction. Although, this is a direct reference to fan culture and Chiranjeevi's own implication in it, the film simultaneously delegitimizes the referent, not by condemning fan activity, but by labelling it as something that is markedly different from fandom, as it actually existed. The mobilization we see on screen, has a history in the fiction. It is a consequence of conscious and painstaking efforts by Suryam, who has 'sacrificed' his caste and decides not to marry, and devotes his life to reform. In this crowd sequence, although the spectator is shown fans, she/he is told that they are, in fact, reformed masses who are now on the path of progress. This is what fandom, which is otherwise meaningless, should become. The film suggests that such a shift has been possible, because the star, himself, has been harnessed to the service of society.

What does a class film offer a star? An unlikely source alerts us to the anxieties evoked by a star's popularity and ways in which a class film addresses them. In a twenty page letter to the star, a 'concerned filmgoer', who insists that he is *not* a fan, writes: 'After *Subhalekha* and *Rudraveena* it was felt that Chiranjeevi acted well; he had talent. But today people don't remember you in *Subhalekha* and *Rudraveena*. In fact no one remembers that you have talent'.[14]

The underlying opposition, set up by the author, is a familiar one: talent versus charisma. The non-fan goes on to add that with *Swayamkrushi*, Chiranjeevi 'reached heights unimagined [by himself]'. But subsequently, he wasted his talent by acting in films like *Gharana Mogudu* and obscene films ('*bootu cinemalu*') like *Alluda Majaka*. The problem with Chiranjeevi, according to this critic, is that he has almost unlimited charisma, and, like a '*Yugakarta*', a man of destiny, can influence 'the whole of society'. Indeed, the 'Megastar' (used with stinging irony throughout the letter), has completely shirked his responsibility towards society and failed to ask himself 'what impact [his] roles have on the youth'. He adds, 'I am not asking you to do social service. The least you can do is to choose roles that don't harm society'. What Chiranjeevi requires is not the 'mass formula', he writes in English to emphasize his point in a letter that is written in Telugu, but a meaningful story: 'A story that can give you ample scope for exhibiting your real talent in acting'.

As the letter progresses, it becomes clear that the author's political objections (the failure of the *Yugakarta* to have a positive influence on society) are, in fact, objections to the consequences of the aesthetic shortcomings (mass formula) of the regular Chiranjeevi vehicle. The aesthetic makeover of Chiranjeevi's films is, therefore, a political move resulting from such shifts as the fusion of charisma with talent, rather than the overshadowing of the former by the latter. The assumption, of course, is that mass formula roles require no talent, but talent itself is defined as the unique ability to influence 'the whole society' positively. For the author, 'exhibiting real talent in acting' is 'social service', and aesthetics' *is* politics in a very immediate sense because film stars can shape the destiny of a society. Needless to add, the credulous viewer surfaces all over again.

Curiously enough, this letter echoes the reasons Chiranjeevi gave for acting in class films and even for producing one:

> The audience pays attention to whatever I [my films] say. I didn't want to merely entertain. I wanted to give a message because what I say is taken to heart

and translated into practice. [So] I had to give a message that was useful to society. … Doing such roles satisfies the soul (Interview, 22 January 1995).

Chiranjeevi's statement needs to be seen as a response to the accusation that his films, mass films, have had a negative impact on society. By featuring in class films, he was trying to demonstrate his good intentions. Furthermore, these films are standing examples of his ability to act/perform: 'I can act, I can prove that I am an actor. Haven't I done [that in] *Aapadbandhavudu* and other such films?'

As far as the star is concerned, the class film lends him respectability on many counts. It offers him an opportunity to *act*, receive awards, and be seen as socially responsible. His excursion into respectable cinema, greeted with much applause by critics, paradoxically reinforces the construction of the mass film and himself as a corrupting influence. His exceptional roles only prove the rule. His 'well-wisher', thus, uses these exceptional roles to reprimand him. The star's presence in purposeful films would, it is presumed, draw the masses to these films to be educated.

The good politics of the class film is, of course, wedded to its good economics. By bringing the masses to these films, the star ensures the integration of the genre into the production economies of the mass film, even as it allows the star to cross over to emerging market segments.

The problem that the class film foregrounds in the language of reform is, in fact, one of the utility of stardom. While the genre itself was premised on notions of societal impact, reform, etc., equally important was the other concern: economic utility. As long as the mass film and the economic model seemed viable, the class film was a site of demonstrating the star's distinction as also managing his 'image problems', exploring new narrative possibilities at a time when the mass film was becoming more and more rigidly formulaic. Looking back, it is possible to suggest that the class film was a part of a risk management strategy, hedging the star's investment in the mass film, which was rapidly limiting the ways in which a star could be deployed. This strategy fell apart when the usefulness of the star-centred production model itself was in doubt.

Reinventing the Megastar: *Hitler*

In the third phase of Chiranjeevi's career, then, the economic crisis facing the industry related, in a rather obvious sense, to the work and worth of stars, was resolved by first *displacing it into the domain of aesthetics*. The problem was defined as one of the poor aesthetic quality

Return of Chiranjeevi: Ongole, 1 May 1997

Fig. 42: Chiranjeevi fans from Hyderabad pose before Hitler's fort, hours before the 100-day function began.

of the mass film, and therefore, quite naturally the solution came in the form of a transformation of the mass film, which, for instance, now got rid of the rowdy and the sexualized mother-in-law. Notably, the revamp of the mass film is singularly focused on the protection of the industry's star-centred production model. The explicit distancing, and rejection, of the Mass Film 1.0, by the re-formed Chiranjeevi vehicle is most clearly evident in *Hitler*. Everything changes, so that nothing is disturbed. Ironically, with the decent mass film in place, the class film itself became more or less extinct, by the turn of the century. Bapu moved to television mythologicals while Vishwanath became a sought after actor in the revived mass film.[15]

As pointed out earlier, Chiranjeevi had no releases for a year after two major commercial disasters in 1995 (*Big Boss* and *Rickshawvodu*).[16] Other stars, especially Nagarjuna and Venkatesh, who were less identified with the mass film than Chiranjeevi and Balakrishna, quickly moved on to other forms, including the romance and comic family melodrama. One such film featuring Nagarjuna, *Ninne Pelladuta* (Krishna Vamsy) was among the most successful films of 1996.[17] It is important to note that Nagarjuna and Venkatesh, did not distance themselves from the star-centred production model, but merely proved to be more flexible in choosing their roles. Furthermore, their family owned production companies, that also owned studios, backed them. But then, they could

also *afford* to be flexible because they were relatively better insulated from the kinds of obligations that cinematic populism, on the one hand, and fan cultures, on the other, place on Chiranjeevi and Balakrishna, who were not only the industry's biggest stars but also most intimately associated with fan-political mobilizations.

Chiranjeevi's comeback film, *Hitler,* was a remake of the 1996 Malayalam hit of the same name, directed by Siddique and featuring Mammotty. The Telugu film had to find a new equilibrium between the star, as the sedimentation of spectatorial memory, and a new form, that could house the star who would now masquerade his difference from his older screen version. Like in the class film, in this film, too, disavowal of the star's own screen history was critical.

As in the earlier mass films, in *Hitler*, too, the fractured extended family is central to the narrative. However, *Hitler* rejects the figure of the rowdy-hero as the instrument of reform and as the centre of the extended family. Instead, the hero, Madhava Rao (Chiranjeevi), is a wealthy, respectable, and responsible member of the town's elite. He is a self-made man, but something of a middle class feudal patriarch in an urban setting.

Hitler's story revolves around Madhava Rao's attempt to protect his five college-going sisters, from the advances of young men or the multiple attempts by street toughs to molest them. The hero does not distinguish between 'lumpens', who sexually assault his sisters, and genuine lovers,

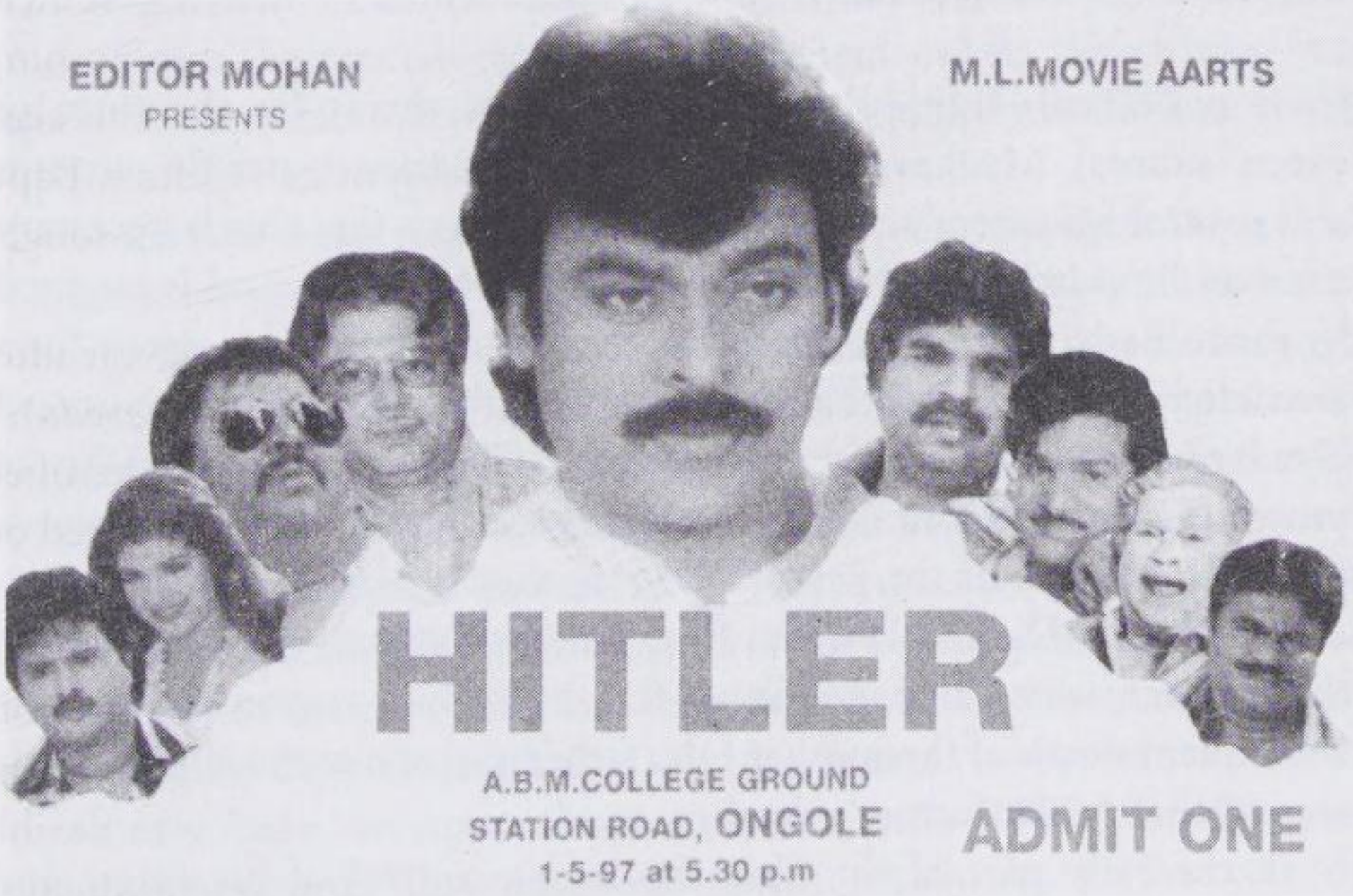


Fig. 43: VIP gate pass for the event.

who make advances to the girls. The film opens with a fight resulting from a youth's lewd behaviour towards the sisters as they alight from a bus. Only minutes later, the hero chases away another young man, Kantha Rao (Sudhakar), who is in love with one of the sisters. Madhava Rao's ruthlessness in clearing the streets of lovers and lumpens earns him the nickname 'Hitler'. Of interest in this regard, is the comic song sequence '*Prema Johar, Down Down Hitler*' (translates as 'Long Live Love, Down with Hitler'), in which two young men in love with two of Madhava Rao's sisters lead a procession of lovelorn youths, holding placards denouncing 'Hitler' as an enemy of love. When they enter his compound and gather before the doorway of the house, Hitler throws open the doors. The very sight of Madhava Rao drives away the youths.

Throughout the film, the camera lingers on the doors of the house. They are either firmly shut or wide open, with Madhava Rao sitting on a chair right in front, guarding his property and wards.[18] On one occasion, his second sister's lover (who is also the son of their maternal uncle), sneaks into the house in Madhava Rao's absence, with disastrous consequences. Rao returns, chases him to his father's house, hits him, and also slaps his father (Rao's uncle), who comes in the way. The extreme reaction results from suspicion of his cousin's intentions. This incident leads to the severing of relations between the two families and Madhava Rao decrees that his sister will not marry the cousin, and he, himself, will not marry the uncle's daughter (Rambha), who is in love with him. He will have nothing to do with a family of 'loafers', he says.

Even as he deals ruthlessly with the external threat (in the form of sisters' suitors), Madhava Rao, simultaneously, tries to strictly monitor and control his sisters' sexuality. The film suggests that this is necessary, since an 'impure' woman attracts the attention of men and is targeted by them. Early in the film, Madhava Rao blames one of his sisters for a love letter written by Kantha Rao, suggesting that she tacitly encouraged him by not actively rejecting his advances. The hero's responsibility of protecting their honour (read chastity) is seen as all the more onerous given the absence of the parents. The mother is dead and the father is a truck driver (Dasari Narayana Rao) who abandoned the family when the children were small, Madhava Rao holds him responsible for the subsequent death of the mother. The father and son are reconciled only seconds before the former's death.

In the early part of the film, the hero's control of his sisters and his sternness with their lovers, is presented as excessive and comic.

However, the narrative retroactively justifies this excess when his eldest sister, drugged and chased by the villains' henchmen, runs into a family friend's house, only to be seduced by the latter (a widower, who eventually marries her). The hero views the loss of his sister's honour as a failure of his guardianship, and says that it (the seduction) would not have happened if their *mother had been alive*. He fails repeatedly, not for the want of effort but because he is doomed to.

With *Hitler*, the mass film reaches an important turning point. From this point in the history of mass film and in Chiranjeevi's own career, the star-hero is no longer a figure of excessive enjoyment. Instead, he is profoundly tragic. The tragedy either gradually unfolds or is carefully hidden from the view of other characters and revealed only in the flashback narrative.

In *Hitler*, the hero does everything he possibly can to protect his family from the outside world. He even accompanies his sisters to college, teaching the lovers and eve-teasers a lesson or two in family values, on the way. Despite his best efforts, he fails repeatedly to discipline his sisters. After the seduction of the first sister, the second elopes with her cousin/lover. The other three sisters leave him when he brings home their two half-sisters after his father's death. Eventually, Madhava Rao stands completely isolated, when his uncle, aunt, and four of his sisters blame him for trying to kill the second sister's husband. It is later revealed that the villains are responsible, but by this time Madhava Rao is a tragic figure, like few other characters in the previous Chiranjeevi mass films. The very people he tried to protect, call his life's labour into question. The film only just manages to end happily, with Rao giving up his idea of leaving home.

Much has been written in the press on the changed 'image' of Chiranjeevi (as reflected in *Hitler*), which was presumably intended to change his constituency. It was not just the film press but also regular newspapers and magazines that made it their business to explain the significance of the change in Chiranjeevi's image. Even while *Hitler* was being made, *India Today* (Telugu) carried out an article on Chiranjeevi. Quoting him, it argued that the long break from shooting, lasting eight months, unprecedented in the careers of his contemporaries, was spent by the star in introspection and reassessment of his career. At the end of the break, the star decided to shed his 'image' (about which he had reportedly been unhappy about since the early 1990s) and acquire a brand new one. The result was *Hitler*, which the article correctly predicted would be a major hit (*India Today* [Telugu], 21 September–5

October 1997: 48–52). In less than a week after *Hitler*'s release, most newspaper reviews of the film not only drew attention to its appeal to the female audiences but also declared that the film was a hit (*Deccan Chronicle*, Hyderabad Edition, 7 January 1997: 17). Gudipoodi Srihari (1997), went a step further in his celebration of *Hitler*, by declaring that fans were disappointed with the film. One newspaper suggested, in a front-page article, that *Hitler* was aimed at launching Chiranjeevi as a politician. It went on to claim that, in the film, the star attempted to endear himself to the female audiences (presumably via the 'family sentiment' of the film) in order to create a vote bank of women (*Andhra Pradesh Times*, 5 January 1997: 1). The celebration of the new image of Chiranjeevi was coeval with the increasing currency of the construct of the responsible fan and the premium on fans' social service.

Regardless of what was being read into it by contemporary observers, I suggest that it was the blockage, itself, that was at issue in the massive exercise in reinventing the star, both on- and off-screen. It is now possible for us to see that the fan was a part of the problem, because of his sense of ownership over the star's image. Srihari's claim that fans were disappointed with *Hitler* implies that the star was not alone in assuming that fans were, at least in part, responsible for holding the star firmly within the image's frame. With *Hitler*, the solution to the blockage came in the form of a disavowal of the rowdy-citizen of the mass film and the production of another kind of representative figure, whose distinction is no longer tied to the protagonist's lower class-caste status. Like the earlier one of the production of Chiranjeevi as the authentic screen subaltern, this one, too, was a complex manoeuvre. On the face of it, the hero was no longer overtly involved in suturing the gap between citizens and subjects, for he would increasingly be a respected middle class figure (*Annayya*, *Daddy*) or even a feudal patriarch (*Indra*). However, the rowdy resurfaces occasionally in these films as a nostalgic figure, suggesting that the rowdy is now incorporated into the new hero, if only as a memory. In *Annayya*, for example, the rowdy appears on occasion as the alter ego of the respectable protagonist and even figures in an 'item song' to indulge in a drunken reverie. In *Andarivadu*, where the star plays the double role of father and son, it is the older man who is the rowdy and prone to excesses. In a comic reversal of roles, the son is the agent of censorship. Arguably, the remakes of *Munnabhai MBBS* (Rajkumar Hirani 2003) and *Lage Raho Munnabhai* (Rajkumar Hirani 2006), namely *Shankar Dada MBBS* (Jayanth C. Paranji 2004) and *Shankar Dada Zindabad* (Prabhu Deva 2007), in which Chiranjeevi

returns to the role of the rowdy after a considerable gap, too, are founded on the nostalgic recall of his earlier roles and allows us to note the nature of the star's image makeover.

Thus, the interplay between distinction and ordinariness continues, albeit in a manner that foregrounds the evolution of the star-protagonist from one to another kind of representative. Orphanhood and incomplete families continue to remain regular features of these films, even as the hero begins to take on explicitly political tasks. Whereas in the earlier phases in his career, Chiranjeevi vehicles staged socio-political battles on the terrain of the familial, now personal and family tragedies are rendered inconsequential before the magnitude of the task ahead of the hero. The masses look up to him as their saviour and he is obliged to act on their behalf, once again, because he is not like them.

This phase of Chiranjeevi's career demonstrates that the mass hero does not have to play lower class/caste roles to be a man of the masses—to speak for them and with their approval, too. In any case, political utility cannot be imputed to the star's screen career on the basis of his subaltern or divine roles, as has been suggested by Pandian (1992) and Das Gupta (1991), respectively. NTR's 'campaign films'—films made after he expressed the desire to enter public life in 1980—did not feature him in the role of a god, even once. Similarly, the Megastar's campaign films, the most important of which I will propose are *Indra*, *Tagore*, and *Stalin*, repeatedly invoked in the months preceding the launch of his political campaign, no longer had him playing the subaltern. So, if the viewer saw and believed, we need to begin with the basic fact that it was neither god nor worker/rowdy that was being seen before the election campaign began.

We get some indication of the priorities of the star's films from their English 'sub-titles'. In the twenty-first century, Telugu films began to have English descriptions, which would appear along with their titles. These are, at times, a rough translation of the title but, at other times, add-ons, lending style and substance to films that were marketing their contemporaneity. In Chiranjeevi's case, the English phrases underscore the nature of the new mass hero, who is no longer the rowdy mechanic or gangsman, but 'Born for the People' (*Indra*) and 'Man for the Society' (*Stalin*).

The Staging Ground

The evolution of the figure of excessive enjoyment into the brooding and even tragic authority figure, is accompanied and made possible by

formal changes in the mass film. In this section, I will elaborate on the manifestation of the blockage at the level of genre, in my discussion of the mass film's new formal features and thematic concerns. The revival of the mass film, post-*Hitler*, allowed it to retain its stars, economic model, and political mandate. A close examination of film form offers valuable insights into what was being attempted by the genre in the changed circumstances and how this was accomplished.

In some early 1990s' mass films, we notice in the comedy track, a sarcastic commentary on the standard elements of the melodramatic structure of popular films, including the film in question, too. The spoof would typically revolve around the routine of identical twins, siblings separated at birth, the suffering mother, etc., while these very elements would be pivots around which the main story was woven. Originating in Tamil, this mode of commentary became a feature of Telugu films by the mid-1990s, especially in films remade from Tamil such as *Pedarayudu*.[19] Historically speaking, the tendency of the comedy track to serve as a commentary on the main narrative, is a well-established convention. In an increasing number of films made around this time, the spoof is no longer limited to the comedy track as in the past, but involves the hero, as well. Against this backdrop, *Alluda Majaka*'s third segment, which has Sitaram masquerading as Toyota, assumes additional significance as evidence of a blockage as it manifests at the level of film form, even before there was any conscious attempt to revamp the mass film.

I have discussed the masquerade at length in the previous chapter, and for the present would only like to recall how the 'sister-sentiment' as the local industry calls it—literally the emotional charge resulting in the hero's love for his sister—is handled during the masquerade segment in *Alluda Majaka*. Sister-love, points out M. Madhava Prasad, is an important feature of the films of the first generation south Indian stars and played an important role in producing these stars as male authority figures.[20] In *Alluda Majaka*, the whole of the third segment is an extended parody of the formulaic elements of the mass film and popular Telugu cinema, in general. The parody of sister-sentiment is particularly interesting. Abbulu, in drag as Dakota, makes advances to the middle-aged Peddaiah, unlike any sister character in Telugu cinema, but claims to be raped, very much like the sisters around whom sister-sentiment is woven (recall *Mutha Mestri*, where the staged rape drives the sister to suicide)—all this in a film in which the primary motivation of the hero's actions, including the courtship with the mother-in-law, is

sister-sentiment. At the story level, Ooha's rejection by her husband is what impels Sitaram to resort to drastic measures. *Alluda Majaka*, like some of the other 1990s films, including E.V.V. Satyanarayana's *Hello Brother* (1994), *parodies the very elements and conventions of contemporary popular cinema that it continues to depend on*.

Sister-love continues to be a crucial motivator of the hero's actions till date and is an excellent example of how the mass film moves on by remaining unchanged. In Chiranjeevi's career, roles of the relative and protector—brother (*Hitler*, *Annayya*, and *Stalin*), father (*Choodalani Vundi*, *Daddy*, and *Mrugaraju*), maternal uncle (*Sri Anjaneyam*)—became more prominent in the third phase of his career. In other words, the rowdy-citizen, who was in any case not insulated from familial obligations, is now increasingly presented as a family man, motivated by family sentiments of various descriptions. This development is coeval with the gradual rise to prominence of his younger brother, Pawan Kalyan, nephew Allu Arjun, and most recently son Ramcharan Tej, who became actors between 1996 and 2007. As a consequence, the star not only emerged in the fiction as the guardian figure that was fashioned after the NTR characters of the 1970s and 1980s, but also carried over some of this guardianship into the public domain where his relatives made a display of their loyalty to him in their films and public utterances alike. For example, Pawan Kalyan acted in a film in which he was the younger of two brothers and the film was appropriately named *Thammudu* (younger brother, directed by Arun Prasad 1999). Further, Pawan Kalyan's films make references to the films and roles of Chiranjeevi.

Simultaneously, Chiranjeevi closely associated himself with charitable activities, augmenting the cinematic image of the respectable guardian figure with some well-publicized real life actions. Starting from *Master*, his films began to include short advertisements, just before or after the interval, in which the star appealed to the viewers to donate blood or pledge their eyes. At times, they even incorporate sequences where the star is seen donating blood and engaging in other charitable activities. In 2006, Chiranjeevi's off-screen respectability was further enhanced with the award of an honorary doctorate by Andhra University. In the same year, he received the Padma Bhushan award from the Government of India.

Funding charitable activities was also the justification he gave for making the hitherto unprecedented move for a major south Indian male star: brand endorsement.

From the late 1990s, Chiranjeevi began to feature in the advertisements for the soft drink, Thums Up. He went on to promote other brands, including Tata Indicom. The biggest south Indian stars, from MGR, NTR, ANR, and Rajkumar, to Rajnikant and Balakrishna more recently, typically stayed away from brand endorsement. Chiranjeevi's move was, thus, a historically significant shift from the earlier tendency of the biggest stars of these industries to limit themselves to the cinema, in terms of their professional career, and appear in public or the media only as respectable patriarchs. Most of the younger Telugu stars, today, routinely do stage shows and advertising, both of which were unthinkable just over a decade ago.[21]

Interesting as they are, none of these 'facts' suffice as an explanation for what the mass film was attempting, with and without Chiranjeevi. *Alluda Majaka*'s treatment of sister-sentiment, allows us to understand the trajectory of the mass film from the late 1990s, which was quite literally charted around the blockage: like the star himself, there were a variety of elements within the film that could not be abandoned. There is a recognition of the difficulty of working with inherited narrative devices and thematic concerns, and a simultaneous inability to move beyond them. This is textually manifest in the curious coexistence of parody and its object within the same film. The new mass film, which followed soon after, is very much a product of the stasis or blockage that the industry experienced in the late 1990s, and the stars were a major part of the problem.

More or less coinciding with the release of *Hitler*, Telugu films across genres began to move away from the complex plots of earlier eras and towards *story-less* films with a very basic plot that had a single twist ('point' as the industry calls it). Take, for example, the hit romance, *Chitram* (Teja 2000), in which two teenage students fall in love and the girl becomes pregnant. She persuades the boy that they should have the child. There are no-subplots, flashbacks, or villains in this film. Generally speaking, there was an increasing number of romantic comedies, which, at times, did have couples negotiating complex familial or societal problems, but the absence of complicated storylines, hitherto typical of Telugu cinema, was a striking feature of the youth film.

Of immediate relevance to our discussion is the gradual crystallization of a two-part structure of the mass film's narrative from the late 1990s. The first part of the film approximates to a romantic comedy, and the second arrives at the story, which would retain all the complexities of popular films of the earlier periods.

Before discussing the new mass film's form, I would like to note that, in industrial terms, the turn of the twentieth century was of immense significance. The mass film's struggle for survival, which was, in fact, the means of shoring up an industrial model that was skewed in favour of the production sector and founded on the ability of the distribution sector to mop up surpluses generated by other activities, was coeval with the emergence of another model, represented by two key local players, Ch. Ramoji Rao and D. Ramanaidu. Soon, there would be others, including major corporations that raised huge amounts of money from the stock market and were looking for investment opportunities in Andhra Pradesh, India's biggest market for films.

By the late 1990s, Ch. Ramoji Rao controlled the biggest media business in the state. This not only included the newspaper *Eenadu,* but also film and other magazines, as well as, satellite television channels in Telugu, and soon afterwards, Kannada, Bengali, Marathi, Urdu, and yet others, targeting specific north Indian states like Bihar. He also built the Ramoji Film City, the largest film production facility in the country.[22] His distribution company had already emerged as the one with the largest reach in the state and among the few to have a presence across the three regions. Having set up the Film City, Ramoji Rao returned to his earlier attempt at serial production of low budget films, which he had begun in 1984 with some remarkable hits, and abandoned in 1993, (see Murari [n.d.]: 265, for details of his film career). From 1998, his production company (Usha Kiron Movies) began to make films not only in Telugu but also other languages. One of the low budget films not only thus produced was *Chitram*, which was also remade in Kannada. By now, Ramoji Rao had achieved the integration of all the sectors of the film industry. He owned a studio, was producing films, and had a distribution company. His distribution company leased cinema halls by the dozen across the state, according to industry sources, but this could not be confirmed from print sources. In addition, he, of course, had his newspaper and television channels.

D. Ramanaidu, too, arrived at a very similar integrationist model, if on a somewhat more modest scale. He, too, owned a studio, a distribution company with offices across the state, leased or bought cinema halls, and his production company (Suresh Productions) was so prolific that, by the early twenty-first century, he had produced over a hundred films, apparently creating a world record. While he did not have newspapers or television channels, he had a son who was a major star (Venkatesh). Unlike Ramoji Rao, Ramanaidu also made big budget films, mostly

with his son. But like Rao, and some years before him, he began to serially produce low budget films in his studio and distribute them, too. When the exhibition sector began collapsing due to rising maintenance costs and reduced attendance, both Rao and Ramanaidu began to acquire control of cinema halls—and all this before media corporations began their attempts to integrate the film industry with money from the stock market.[23]

Against this backdrop, the attempt to revive the mass film can be seen as constituting something of a heroic effort by the local industry to retain an older model founded on the primacy of the retail investor at the distribution level, who, in turn, propped up the producer.

Returning to the question of form, although chronologically speaking *Hitler* was followed by *Master* (1997), I will first discuss *Bavagaru Bagunnara* (1998) because, like *Hitler*, it is strikingly different from the early 1990s mass film, and allows me to develop my argument on the new mass film. *Bavagaru Bagunnara*, has a neat two-part structure like the other story-less films of the period.[24] The first part of the film is a pure romantic comedy, even set in a location (New Zealand) that is different from the second (remote village presided over by a feudal lord). Raju (Chiranjeevi) and Swapna (Rambha) meet in New Zealand. They fall in love after some comic misunderstandings. They know nothing of each other's past and, by the end of the first part of the film, they return separately to India, promising to meet soon. Once Raju is back in India, we realize that the hero is committed to philanthropy (like Chiranjeevi himself). He gives away the money he earns in New Zealand to an orphanage. Soon after this fact is established, the story begins: the hero saves Sandhya (Rachana) from an attempted suicide and discovers that she has been betrayed by her lover and is pregnant. He offers to act as her husband till the child is born, and stage an abandonment of the family afterwards, so that she can, not only return to her parental home and save her family from disgrace, but also continue to remain there after the child is born. There are plot level borrowings from this point of the film, from the Hollywood film *A Walk in the Clouds* (Alfonso Arau 1995).

Raju now encounters a comic variant of the feudal lord of the *Pedarayudu* variety, played by Paresh Rawal. *Bavagaru* presents him as a petty tyrant who does not command respect. Even at this point, the film continues to be comic for the most part, although the plot becomes increasingly more complicated. Much of the comedy now results from the return of the heroine Swapna into the picture. It turns out that she

is the younger sister of Sandhya. Soon, a major conspiracy to defame Swapna's family is revealed, and the hero is drawn into the family's affairs, facilitating, in effect, a transition from an older feudal order to a new one that is organized around himself. This transition is arguably what the story is all about.

Bavagaru is an important example, though not the earliest or even the most significant one, of the tendency to structure the narrative as two more or less unconnected parts, with the story making an appearance only in the latter part of it. The entire New Zealand segment could be seen as an elaborate prelude to the story. In *Ninne Pelladuta* (1996), we arrive at the lone twist—the element complicating the love story—at the very end of the film, when an old family feud erupts to the surface, preventing the marriage of the lovers.

The late 1990s narrative form may, thus, be seen as movement from romantic comedy, let me call it C, to the familiar melodramatic one, M, with its complex vendettas that spill over from another time and place. *Bavagaru* can be seen as moving from C to M, and accompanying this move is the change, not only of location but also genre, *within* the same film.

What is this thing that *Bavagaru* (and *Ninne Pelladuta*) arrive at? Segment C can be seen as showcasing the star's newness (as lover and clown who is strikingly middle class), while M returns star and spectator to the former's familiar screen avatar as a superhuman figure. So M is the segment in which the star-protagonist begins to resemble his older self, recalling the mass film of the late 1980s, early 1990s, vintage. And this is the segment when the past, with all its violence, returns quite literally with a vengeance.

In *Master* (Suresh Krissna 1997), the movement, like in most other contemporary films, is rather more complex. It, too, begins as a comedy, interrupted only with inconsequential incidents of violence that are easily handled by the hero. Later in the film, it is revealed that the hero, Rajkumar, a college teacher in the present, has a violent past. In the course of a flashback sequence, it is revealed that the hero was a resident of Delhi. His girlfriend Roshini was killed by Vikram (Satya Prakash). Rajkumar had killed Vikram and served a five-year jail term. The film opens after his release from prison, and with his appointment as a college teacher. Rajkumar's past returns in the form of Vikram, presumed dead all these years. To his surprise, Rajkumar learns that not only did Vikram survive, but it was his elder brother and gangster (Puneet Issar) who, had in fact, killed Roshini. Rajkumar, however, is prevented

from seeking revenge, by his mentor and Roshini's father Janardhan Rao (Vijay Kumar), who knew the truth all along but did not reveal it to Rajkumar, fearing the consequences of the latter's confrontation with the villain. Soon enough, Rajkumar enters into a confrontation with both Vikram and his brother over the love affair between two of his students. He kills both villains and spends yet another five years in jail.

Unlike the 1980s mass film, this film has a twist that surprises both hero and spectator. Such a twist was more or less inconceivable in the past. The film gives the impression that the spectator is being prepared for this twist, by making partial revelations. Even before the details of the hero's past life are revealed in the form of a flashback, there is an obvious hint of Rajkumar's dark past, when a thug, employed by some students who pick up a quarrel with their master, salutes him and apologizes, instead of hitting him. While the flashback is occasioned by the plea of one of his students Kanchana (Sakshi Shivanand) to marry her, unlike most flashbacks in the mass film, it only reveals the hero's ignorance. The truth of the murder is revealed in the form of another flashback narrated by Janardhan Rao. *Master* establishes a new pattern for the emulation of the later mass films. Nevertheless, the first flashback *is* a revelation, in spite of its inaccuracy: once the past is revealed, there is a rupture in the present that completely disrupts its normalcy. Nothing can remain the same again. There is no escaping the violence at the level of the fiction, including the plot level complications that will now inevitably follow. In short, the mass film has *erupted* into a film that was promising to be something else.

So the C-M movement, at first glance, appears to be a movement in time, with the recollection of past events set in another place (Delhi). Soon, it becomes clear that it is also a movement across genres.

The structuring of the new mass film can also be seen in *Choodalani Vundi*, where we notice a C-M movement between time, place, and genre.[25] The entire present of the film is set in Calcutta. The film opens with Ramakrishna (Chiranjeevi) arriving in Calcutta and ends with him preparing to leave. In the city, he falls in love with a neighbour (Soundarya), who has been cheated by a lover. It turns out that Ramakrishna is on the lookout for his son, who has been kidnapped by his rich in-laws. They run a criminal syndicate and the boy is seen as an heir to their family-business. The dramatic return to the past occurs when the hero is attacked by a gang and almost killed. His past life, set back 'home' in Andhra, about his love and elopement with the

gangster's daughter Priya (Angela Zaveri), the birth of his son, and the death of his wife during an attack by the father-in-law's gang, is now revealed. The malevolent feudal authority that the hero has to battle to take back his son, lives in Calcutta, in an interesting reversal of the usual location of such figures (in the backward village). He thus arrives in Calcutta, jeans clad and guitar strumming, singing praises of the great city. At this point the film begins.

Among the most interesting and striking examples of this movement occurs in *Indra*, the film which triggered-off yet another round of speculation about the star's immanent political entry (Fig. 45). By *Indra*, the mass film's new form was elaborately worked out and we see the full import of the C-M movement, which is also the movement of the hero from ordinariness (taxi driver) to a leader of superlative dimensions. The anticipation of this transformation is one of the chief pleasures of the film.

Indra is the quintessential turn-of-the-century mass film. It belongs to a variant of the mass film that, by this time, came to be known as the *faction film*. The faction film revolves around the violent political feuds of the Rayalaseema region. In the 1990s, these feuds spilt over to the city of Hyderabad, which now became the battleground for factionists who were an integral part of both the Congress and Telugu Desam Party. The factionists have indulged in spectacular acts of violence in the city. These include a landmine attack on the film crew *Sriramulayya* (N. Shankar 1999) that was travelling with a major TDP factionist, who was also the film's producer.[26] The faction film was, in part, a response to the far wider interest in media, academic, and civil liberties circles in the political factions of the Rayalaseema region.[27]

Among the earliest films to revolve centrally around the 'factionist', is *Preminchukundam Raa* (1997), directed by Jayanth C. Paranji, just before he made *Bavagaru*. Of rather more direct significance for *Indra*, however, are the two remarkable Balakrishna vehicles, *Samarasimha Reddy* (B. Gopal 1999) and *Narasimha Naidu* (B. Gopal 2001), which were instrumental in harnessing the fascination with the Rayalaseema region and its factionist, into the assembly of a vehicle for the industry's biggest stars. In this process, the mass film regained its pride of place in the industry. In these films, the factionist doubles into a benevolent and malevolent one, with the star playing the former and ridding the region of the oppression of the latter, in effect, offering himself as the leader figure, who is a perfect fusion of mass approval and feudal lineage.[28]

Fig. 44: In the film: Indra's homecoming.

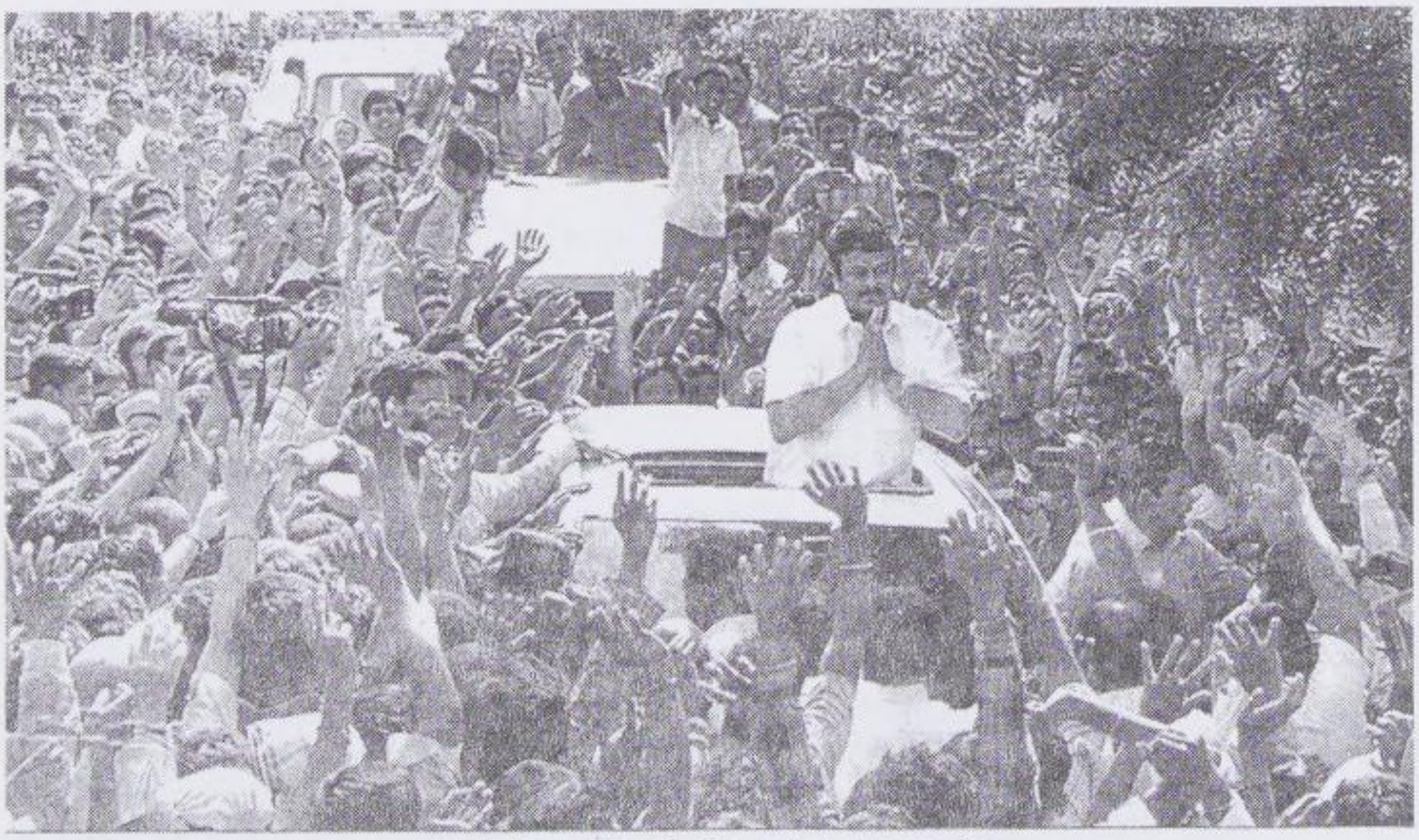
Fig. 45: Speculations about Chiranjeevi's political crossover in *Andhra Jyothi* (9 December 2006, Bangalore edition: 1). The paper uses a still from *Indra*. Source: *Andhra Jyothi*.

Indra's opening segment begins with a documentary style recollection of the history of faction violence in the region. This segment ends with the child Indrasena Reddy (or Indra), in school uniform, who has just lost his parents in the latest episode of violence, assuring his grandmother that he will now lead his people (read faction). The credits follow as the film now moves to the present (2002) in Benares (the fourth non-local setting for the story in Chiranjeevi's work since *Master*), with no reference at all to past events or explanation for the change of setting. Moreover, the hero (Chiranjeevi), is a taxi driver called Shankar Narayana. Much later in the film, it is revealed through a flashback that Indra has voluntarily given up all his property in order to persuade the villains—from the rival faction—to give away some of their land for a developmental project that would bring water to the entire Rayalaseema region. He has quite literally been in exile, living under a false name all these years for the sake of the people of the region. In the latter part of the film, the hero returns to his 'homeland' to confront and defeat the villains.

The movement of the film can be schematically represented as M-X-M, where the opening segment forms a unit that belongs to a melodramatic structure. It is a prelude to the full-fledged melodrama that unfolds in the third segment. Rather than proceed from prelude to the main story, the film moves to a new and apparently unconnected segment X—which is not only separated in time and place but also has a distinctly different storyline. Segment X is a complete story in itself, even a low intensity mass film. There are hints anticipating the return to M throughout X, but the inevitable is repeatedly deferred till the revelation of the past. A point is soon reached when X reaches a crisis because there has been a sudden, but not entirely unexpected, disruption of its universe, which cannot be set right even by Shankar Narayana. This is

caused by the eruption of M into X. Once M resurfaces, it is no longer possible for the hero to remain in the masquerade world of X. He has to return to M, which is where the root of the problem lies.

In the film, as with most other faction films, time and place are interestingly fused together. The past is also a place (Rayalaseema), which returns to haunt the present that, in turn, is set in another place where the hero lives a life marked by eminently lower order crises. The first problem Shankar Narayana faces, comes in the form of a Muslim gangster Shaukhat Ali Khan (Puneet Issar), who, as it turns out, is from Hyderabad and is, therefore, Telugu speaking. Soon enough, Narayana and Khan become friends. The next non-confrontation is between Shankar Narayana and the politically powerful Uttar Pradesh Governor Chenna Kesava Reddy (Prakash Raj), who, too, is Telugu speaking. This confrontation is caused by the Governor's daughter Pallavi (Sonali Bendre), who is thought to be missing but is, in fact, in love with Indra and has begun to live in his house without revealing her identity. The Governor arrives with the full might of the state to take his daughter back. Upon seeing Shankar Narayana, however, he recognizes him and folds his hands to say something but is prevented by a sign from the former. He merely tells his baffled followers that this man is not an enemy but Kasi's Lord Vishwanath himself, and leaves. The mystery deepens.



పరిపుల్ల చిన్న సగం పిథుల్లో ఆకేష జనవాహని 'మధ్య చిరంజీవి

FIG. 46: Chiranjeevi during the early days of his campaign (*Andhra Jyothi*, 21 September 2008, Bangalore edition: 10). Notice the similarity with Fig. 44. *Source: Andhra Jyothi.*

The *story* now begins with Shankar Narayana agreeing to the marriage of his niece with an employee, Giri (Sivaji). The marriage, however, is disrupted by a mysterious woman (Arti Agarwal), who asks Giri to leave the marriage venue with her, which he does obediently. At this point Valmiki (Tanikella Bharani), a loyal servant of Narayana who is thought to be mute, starts to speak. He reveals the mystery surrounding Indra: we learn of his sacrifices for the people of Rayalaseema, the evil factionists of the region and his battles with them, and also his exile from the region, for the sake of peace and progress of the land. The mysterious woman is Snehalata Reddy, the daughter of the factionist patriarch killed by Indra and also the girl he was to marry. Giri, too, is a member of her family.

When we are returned to the present, Indra's niece attempts suicide because she is pregnant and ashamed of harming his reputation. Indra decides to return to Rayalaseema and confront the villains and bring the groom back.

The interesting question that the narrative poses is what does Indra return to? What does the segmentation of the narrative facilitate?

There are interesting similarities between *Indra* (and the faction film, in general) and the films Madhava Prasad (1998) discusses in connection with his *fragment B* argument. In his analysis of *Roja* (Mani Rathnam 1992) and *Damini* (Rajkumar Santoshi 1993), Prasad draws attention to the segmentation of their narratives. Labelling the narrative segments as A, B, and fragment B (*fB*), he points out that these films begin with a fragment that properly belongs to the latter segment of the narrative, B. He goes on to explain:

> Let us note, first of all, that the transition from *fB* to A comes as a rupture, a sharp discursive break which leaves something unexplained until Segment B retroactively absorbs the enigmatic fragment into its order of narration and thereby infuses it with meaning … . Thus the fragment serves, in the overall organization of narrative flow, as (1) an enigma which hovers over the action of segment A, a premonition of things to come, of which the figures of the narrative are themselves blissfully ignorant; and (2) a cue which enables us to identify the second break (1998: 222).

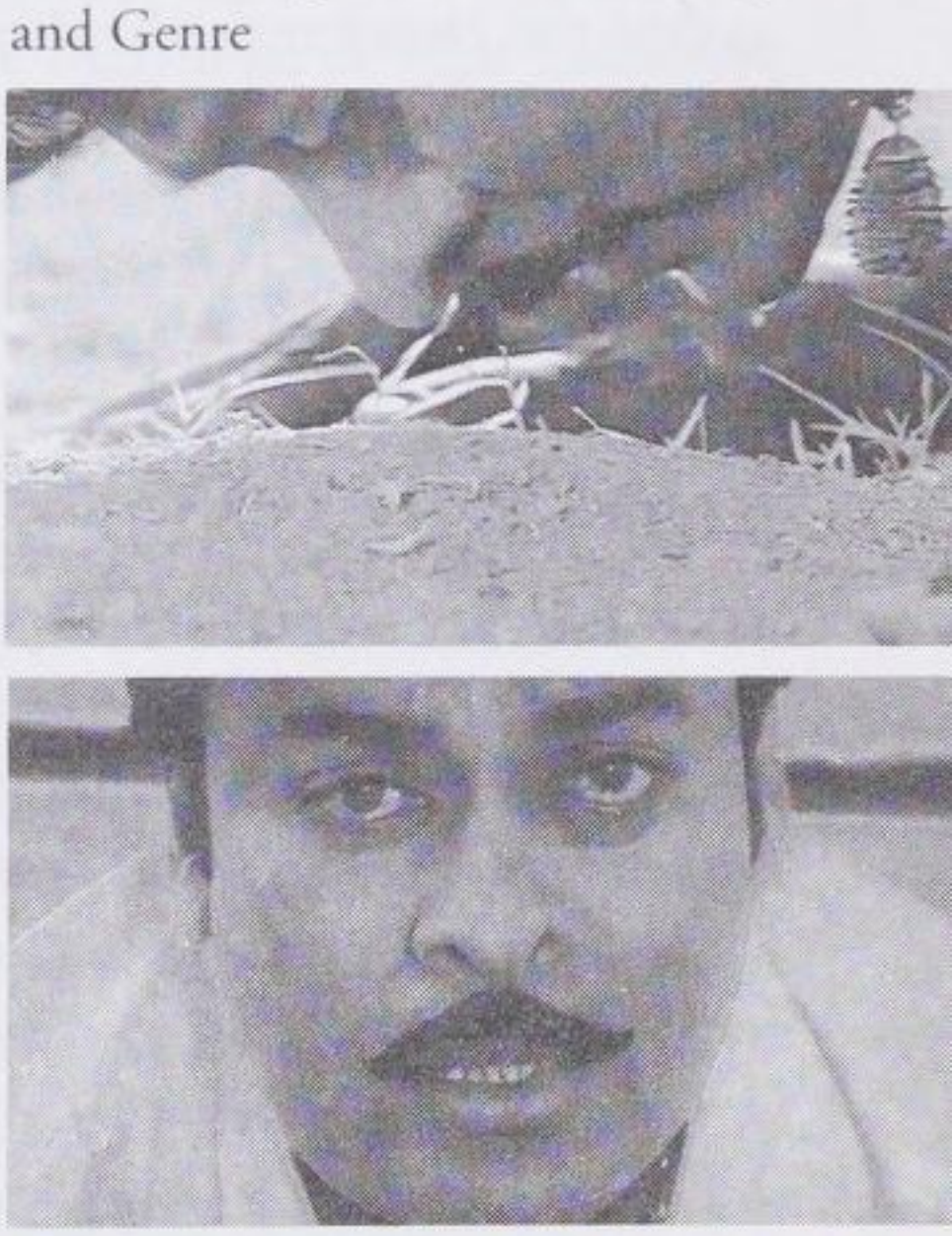
The segmentation of *Indra*, I suggest, is less devoted to the building of enigma or suspense, than it is to the facilitation of a movement between *generic possibilities*. The characters concerned (Indra and his followers, who now pass off as taxi drivers, etc.) are fully aware of the existence of M—the other time, place, and story—even as the spectator anticipates its return.[29]

When the narrative of *Indra* arrives at the second M segment (of the M-X-M structure), the film effectively confirms its status as a mass film. Every faction film reasserts the impossibility of movement away from the mass film narrative. The newness of the new mass film lies in ensuring the channelling of all emerging generic possibilities to the mass film. There is, however, a significant change: the scale of M segments is truly unprecedented even by the mass film's standards of immodesty. The enormity of violence, the size of pro-filmic spectacles, the viciousness of the villains—everything is magnified in order that the star-protagonist inhabits a world that is worthy of his presence.

The heroes of the faction film, whether the star in question is Chiranjeevi, Balakrishna, or NTR Jr., return to realms of spectacular *devotion*. In both *Samarasimha Reddy* and *Indra*, mammoth crowds choke the streets, and fill the frame, to cheer the protagonist's return to the Rayalaseema region (Fig. 44). In an interesting gesture to televisual representation of mass enjoyment, which is in itself a source of spectatorial pleasure, these films recreate the live audience around the star-protagonist. I will have more to say about this below. In these two films, the crowds are 'real' in the sense that they are not a product of computer animation. The shooting of these sequences received considerable press coverage, too, which is evidence of the continued popularity of the star in question and, by implication, relevance of the mass film itself. [30]

The inability to move beyond a certain model of stardom and genre was not a hindrance but something to be affirmed, even celebrated. The homecoming sequence in *Indra* underscores this aspect of the faction film. Indra, having just decided that he would bring the niece her groom, arrives in Rayalaseema in a helicopter. He kneels down and kisses the ground—terra firma, home, mass film. Even as his lips touch the earth, there is a cheer. Indra looks up and sees people waving, jumping, and laughing in ecstasy.

Homecoming: Return to the Region and Genre



They look directly into the camera, instantly re-establishing the mass film's equivalence between camera, star, and spectator. He folds his hands with tears in his eyes. There is then a cut to him riding an open jeep waving and folding his hands to crowds who shower him with petals and throw garlands at him. In hindsight, the reading of this film by the press as yet another sign of Chiranjeevi's preparation for a political entry, was, after all justified. The star is offered as a political leader by demonstrating his drawing power. A formal announcement alone stood in the way between fiction and reality.

Just as the mass film was back in business with the faction film and other variants, Chiranjeevi's career as the number one star of the industry was re-established with these very variants. There were some major disasters along the way, *Mrugaraju* and *Anji*, both adventure films broadly based on Hollywood hits, that demonstrated that the Megastar was most profitably cast in films whose novelty was limited to the middle segment of the M-X-M narrative. Simultaneously, whether or not it can be attributed to a grand political design, a new formula emerged in his films. Thematically, there was an increased focus on showcasing the character's altruism, which was the central concern of *Stalin*, even replacing vigilantism as the mode of problem solving at the story level. The second *Munnabhai* remake, *Shankar Dada Zindabad*, too, would coincidentally take this line. But *Tagore,* too, was 'about' a life devoted to the betterment of society.

Liveness of the Mass Film: *Tagore* and *Stalin*

It is not my argument that the most recent phase of Chiranjeevi's career has been characterized by the assembly of a campaign vehicle that worked to deceive the masses into believing the star's benevolence, generosity, etc. Assembling a campaign vehicle was, perhaps, less of an issue than the immediate challenge facing the star and industry. How was he, and by extension the cinema, to retain the consumer base at a time when theatrical attendance was declining? As with Hollywood blockbusters, Telugu films, too, became more spectacular. As far as the local market was concerned, the star was seen as integral to the production of such spectacles, and the new mass film provides ample evidence of the ever-increasing scale of the spectacle.

Industry observers have somewhat misleadingly suggested that the new mass film aims at 'drawing audiences (back) to the cinema hall'. In a sense, this is, of course, true, but we need to note that money was

increasingly being made beyond the local box office, in spite of the difficulties with emulating the Bollywood model of marketing and monetization, Telugu film industry was not unaware of these possibilities. If the new context is one in which films are likely to circulate well beyond the cinema hall, as well as, the geographical limits of the traditional market for Telugu films (hitherto Andhra Pradesh and neighbouring states), what could the cinema do to distinguish itself from other forms of entertainment?

The success of the mass film and its stars in prolonging their careers, in a situation that was inimical to their survival, lies in showcasing the, by now well-established, connection with the willing spectator. The new formula, let me suggest, is only incidentally concerned with showcasing the social commitment and altruism of our heroes. Even as the cinema was destined/doomed to transmogrify into other formats and migrate to ever-newer sites of consumption, the willing spectator was re-inscribed into the new mass film. Not only as the privileged addressee of the fiction as also a critical presence within it. In the new mass film, the diegetic collective is formed by the critical mediation of *television*, as if in an acknowledgement of the modes by which the film, itself, is likely to reach its spectator. What, then, can the mass film do that the lesser form (television) cannot do, but will certainly relay? Not identify a set of concerns or produce superhuman heroes but *re-institute a spectatorial position that can travel to television and other sites, replicating the experience of the cinema.*

In *Tagore*, the eponymous hero is a university teacher who heads the Anti Corruption Forum (ACF), an underground group dedicated to weeding out corruption. It comprises of his former students, who have found employment in government offices and gather information on corrupt government officials for the Forum. The film begins with the kidnapping of a group of government officers and the killing of the most corrupt of them. Tagore, like most of the characters Chiranjeevi played since 1997, is devoted to charitable actions. Like in *Master*, the star's appeal to the viewers to donate blood and pledge their eyes is inserted into the film, to be screened during the interval. The insert is also to be seen in the VCD/DVD versions of the film.

The story is woven around the production of Tagore/Chiranjeevi as a father figure. Early in the film we realize, that Tagore is the father of four adopted children, each from a different faith (one of them is racially white, too). We learn from the flashback narrative that Tagore has lost his wife and child, in an accident caused by the negligence

of a powerful builder (Saiyaji Shinde). Tagore's efforts to bring the crime to light, fail, because the builder bribes the officials concerned. Tagore, however, does not seek revenge. He, instead, decides to target corruption as a whole.

Tagore carries out his mission by creating a dedicated band of followers—even becoming something of a father figure to them over a period of time. The ACF is a fan club, of precisely the kind that Chiranjeevi was hoping to assemble off-screen, but also a family, whose members are united by their love and dedication to its figure of authority. There are two points in the film when the paternal relationship between Tagore and ACF members is highlighted. The first is when it is discovered that a list of corrupt officers is topped by the biological father of Gopi (played by the film's director V.V. Vinayak), one of the most committed members of the group, Tagore and the rest of the ACF are in a dilemma, so the former asks Gopi, what should be done. Gopi replies that the group should go ahead and kill the officer. He, then, tells Tagore that he is *his* student ('*nenu mee studentni*') and not the corrupt son of a corrupt father. Tagore is deeply moved.

Later in the film, the police track down the members of the ACF due to the efforts of one of the department's drivers (Prakash Raj). The members are arrested and subjected to torture, but none of them reveal information about Tagore. Their parents are then brought to the lock up to break them, but contrary to the expectations of the police, the mothers tell their children not to betray Tagore. The mothers thus remind their sons about the status of Tagore as the de-facto parent of the group.

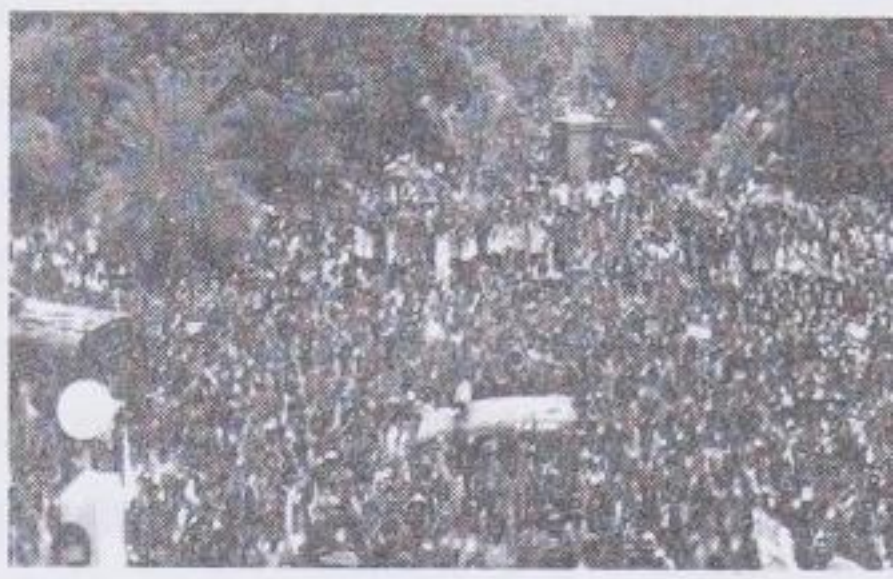
Tagore, nevertheless, surrenders. Thus far, the film is a remake of the Tamil hit featuring Vijaykanth titled *Ramana* (A.R. Murugadoss 2002). Whereas in the original film, the Ramana character dies, in *Tagore,* the hero cannot die. Chiranjeevi himself claimed that the story was changed keeping in mind the love and affection of his viewers, who simply could not bear to see him suffer, let alone die on screen (Rammohan Rao 2003).

Once he is arrested, large crowds, calling themselves the ACF, begin to form in support of Tagore. Mass mobilization occurs even as the soundtrack plays a song whose lyrics are borrowed from a poem ('*Jayabheri*') written by the famous revolutionary poet, Sri Sri.[31]

Tagore is not just an agent of mobilization, but the cause, the reason why the crowds have taken to the street. The crowds gather with giant plywood cut-outs of Tagore as their backdrop.

The state's honest Chief Minister (played by K. Vishwanath of class film fame), decides that the court proceedings should be telecast live so that the society can learn about dedication and sacrifice from Tagore, who according to him is, 'the real leader' ('*asalaina nayakudu*'). Crowds gather before the giant screen installed before the court while smaller groups congregate around television screens at their homes and on the streets.

Tagore addresses this live audience from the courtroom, speaking into the camera. He is cheered by viewers gathered before various screens. What is cinematic in all this, is its fulcrum, the star-protagonist as the object of trust and authority. The 'public out there' that the film renders visible on screen is, no doubt, accessed by television, but it is a collective of wards, admirers, and fans. In the mass film, the spectator (alone) sees the hero, and sees the crowd, relaying the latter's wish to the former. Now, television is the means of relay between the protagonist and his constituency.



Tagore's live courtroom drama

Tagore: 'Making the government work your right …'

As with *Indra* and *Stalin*, in this film, too, there are hints at the star's immanent entry into politics. The Chiranjeevi character's mission in the film has obvious political overtones and leads to the speculation that corruption would be the star's most important campaign issue. The film ends with a message from Tagore to the television audience and the film's audience alike: 'It is your right to make the government work for you. Don't buy this right with money'.

While noting that there is evidence to suggest that these films, like the 1980s work of NTR, were made while Chiranjeevi was actively planning his political strategy, it is necessary to move beyond story level production of the altruistic leader figure and also the so-called messages of the recent films, for two reasons.[32] First, in any case, the message is far too banal or ornamental to merit serious discussion. *Indra*, for example,

ends with the protagonist pleading with his followers to give up violence so that the (Rayalaseema) region could develop. This message comes as a culmination of a thrilling climax in which the hero kills/maims dozens of people. Second, no matter how overt the attempt by these films to present Chiranjeevi as a future leader in the domain of electoral politics, such attempts are founded on what I have, in a previous chapter, called cinematic populism. Long before any intentionality could be attributed to Chiranjeevi, the cinematic structure, producing the star as an object of spectatorial investment and trust, was already in place, not only in Chiranjeevi's films but also in the mass film, as a whole. Against the backdrop of the mass film, it is possible to suggest that, when the star decided to make a career change, he did not merely add new content to his films but more importantly, *reinforced the foundation—cinematic populism—to ensure the convergence of utterance and affect.*

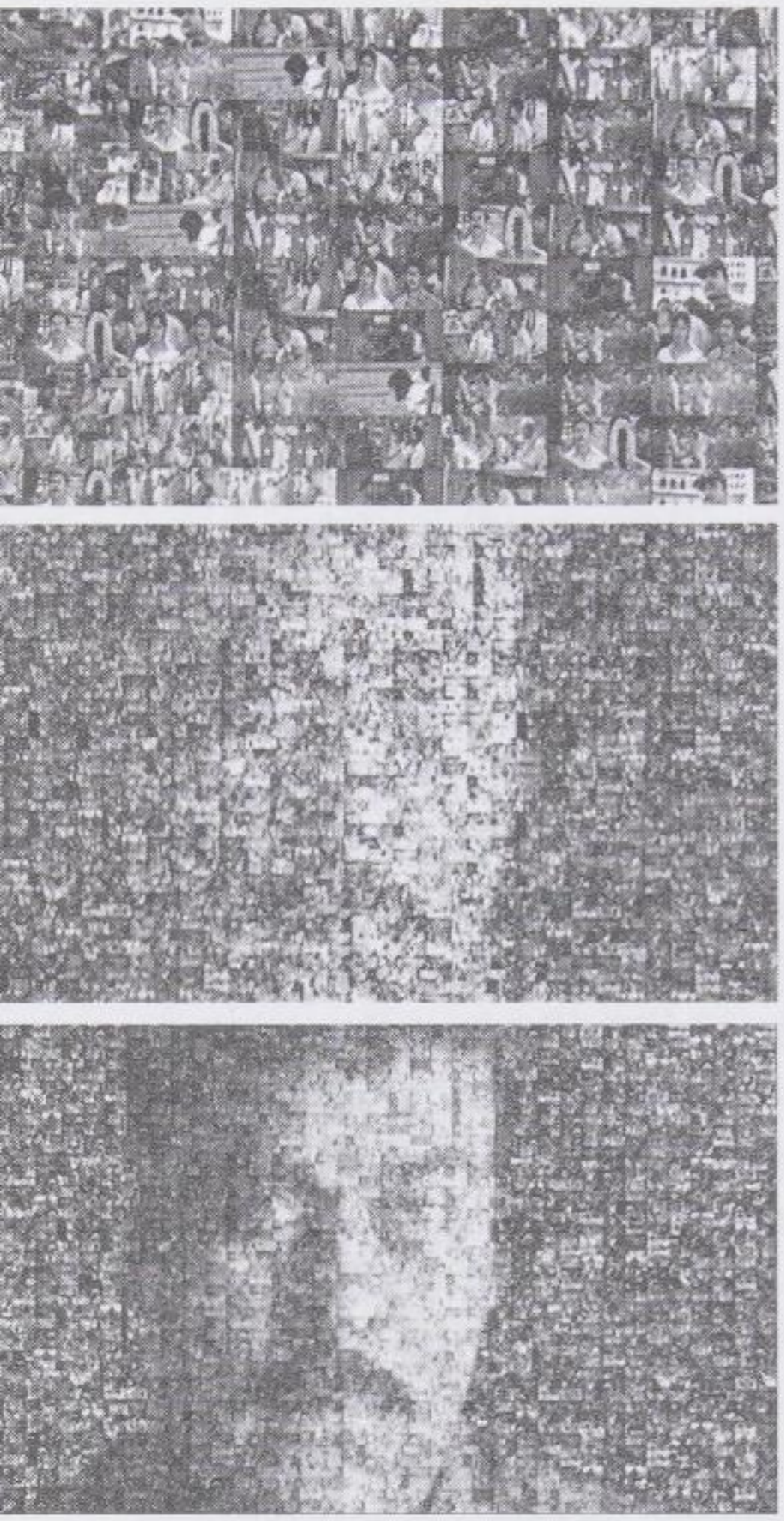
Stalin offers the clearest evidence yet (as of September 2008) of the production of the new leadership figure as the anchor of the pleasures of willing spectatorship.

First, I will reconstruct the film's story in some detail to draw attention to its differences and overlap with the 1990s mass film. Stalin is produced as a screen rendition of Chiranjeevi, himself, in terms of his commitment to social service. There are three important sequences featuring physically challenged children/youth, a group that has been a key focus of his social service from the 1990s.[33] Stalin is a tragic figure marked by suffering that is mostly vicarious. Further, as it turns out, throughout the film's present, death was looming large over him, unknown to him and the spectator. He is a former army major who resigns when he is offered an administrative posting after a spectacular act of bravery that saves many soldiers' lives and also results in multiple bullet injuries. He is told that the transfer is a punishment for insubordination (he defied his superior's orders not to undertake the dangerous mission). We learn only towards the end of the film that his colonel (Mukesh Rishi) took him off combat duty because there is a bullet lodged in Stalin's heart. Knowing that the brave soldier would be broken by his inability to continue in a combat posting, the colonel had created a situation in which Stalin would be forced to resign.

The story proper begins with the death of a physically challenged college student, who commits suicide out of despair, when she is unable to take her annual examination for want of an assistant (she does not have hands and needs someone to write the exam for her). Stalin usually assists her, but on that day, he is busy helping a blind girl

with her exam. Stalin is deeply moved by her death and shocked by the indifference of the public—whom she has begged for help. Typical of the mass film, Stalin learns of the public's indifference because the of spectator's awareness of the girl's actions before her death, not because he himself witnessed them. He comes up with the idea that the world can be changed by people forming a massive network in which each individual helps just three others and requests, in lieu of thanks, that three others be helped. This scheme, with striking parallels with money circulation pyramid schemes that became increasingly popular in Andhra Pradesh from the 1990s, and in the more recent past implicated many prominent film industry representatives as well, however, does not take off.[34] Although the three people he helps promise to 'pay it forward',[35] to recall the name of the Hollywood film from which *Stalin* borrows elements of its story, Stalin soon realizes that none of them do. On the other hand, a minor roadside altercation triggerss off a violent chain of events that soon involves the local MLA (Pradeep Rawat) and his factionist father-in-law Muddu Krishnaiah (Prakash Raj). Stalin comes to the sad realization that evil spreads faster and wider than good. But unknown to him, a revolution is taking place. Although initially the beneficiaries fail to help others and find excuses for breaking their promise, they have a change of heart. Soon, there is a growing chain of people who have begun to implement his plan. The state's Chief Minister himself is saved from assassination by a physically challenged girl who tells him to help three others. The Chief Minister initiates an enquiry to discover the initiator of the scheme. Meanwhile, Muddu Krishnaiah's son dies in a failed attempt to kill Stalin and his nephew. The factionist Home Minister decides to kill the Chief Minister and implicate Stalin in the murder. Stalin rescues the injured Chief Minster, ensuring that he receives medical aid and is sheltered from the villains. However while fighting the villain's men, who descend by the hundreds in trucks like their counterparts in the faction film, he has a heart attack. An autorickshaw driver (L.B. Sriram), who, too, has been a beneficiary of Stalin's scheme, rushes him to the hospital.

From this point in the film, television plays the critical role of relaying information and mobilizing people. Army officials in Delhi come to know from a television news broadcast that Stalin has been declared a terrorist. The colonel and his men arrive at the hospital, with authorization from the central government to protect Stalin while the case is investigated. The Chief Minister regains consciousness and informs a television channel on the phone that Stalin is not a terrorist and has, in fact,



Stalin: The scheme begins to work.

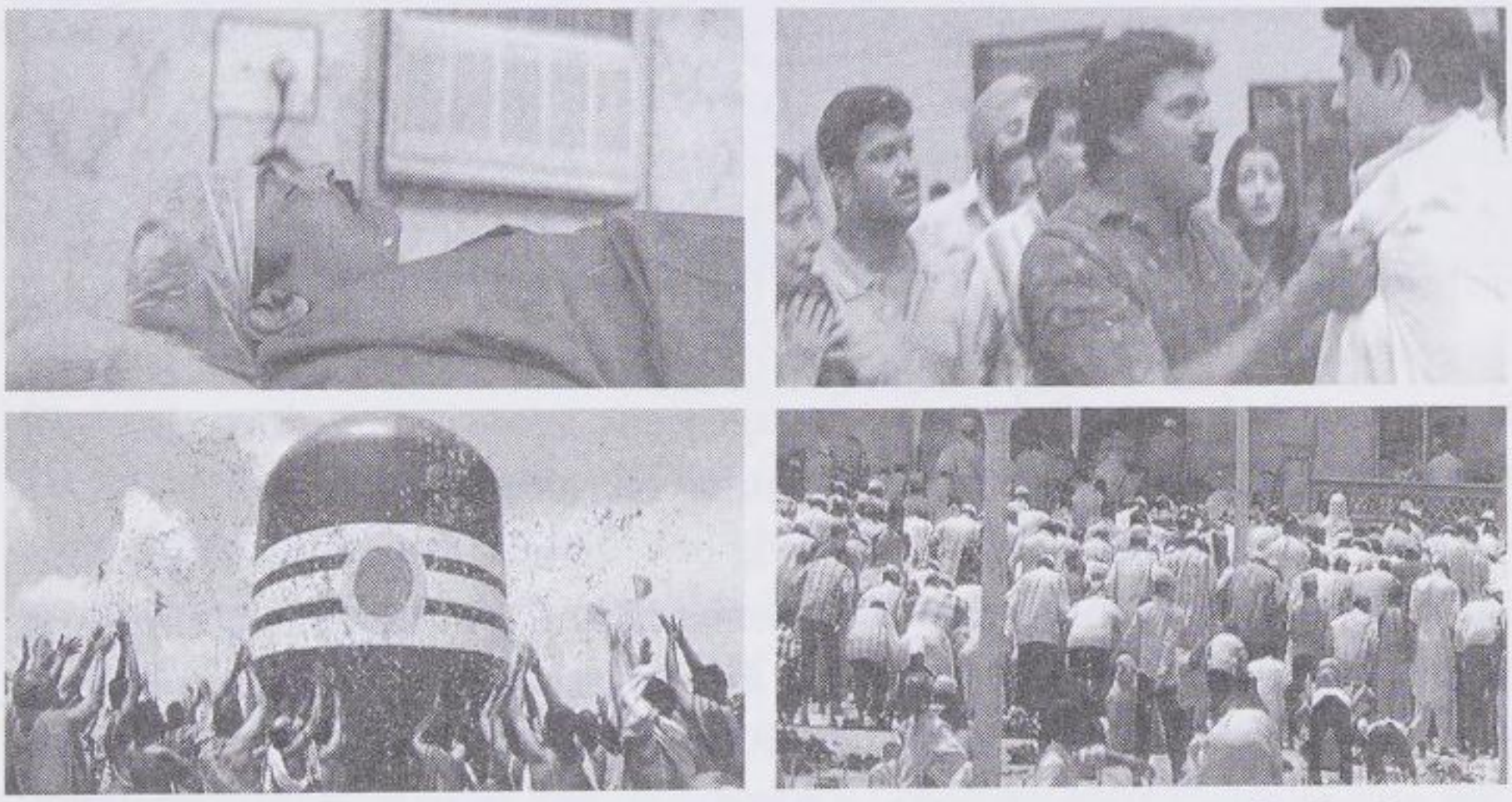
saved his life. Stalin's sister (Khushboo) appears on television to tell the viewers about the sad turn of events in the life of a man dedicated to helping others. The Chief Minister now realizes that Stalin has saved his life twice over and heads for the hospital. The villain, too, learns from television that Stalin is in a hospital and instructs his men to kill him there. The Chief Minister reaches the hospital and tells television crews that Stalin is the initiator of the novel scheme that has benefited millions. Crowds of Stalin supporters, estimated by the villain's henchman to be 200,000 strong, surround the hospital, forming an impenetrable ring around him.

Then comes the moment of irrationality. The surgeon (Suman) declares that Stalin cannot be operated upon because the bullet is too deeply lodged in his heart. His survival chances are 'less than 1 per cent'. The doctor is prevented from leaving the scene by Gopi (Sunil), one of Stalin's three friends, who literally collars him and demands that he perform the surgery anyway. In his moving outburst, Gopi asks the doctor: 'Who are you to say that he will not live? Are you god? His heart belongs to 10 crore [100 million] people.[36] You operate. He will live.' He ends his outburst in tears. The doctor returns to the operation theatre. Various religious communities offer prayers while a song whose lyrics include a line asking if the sun can take a holiday, plays in the background. The operation is a success.

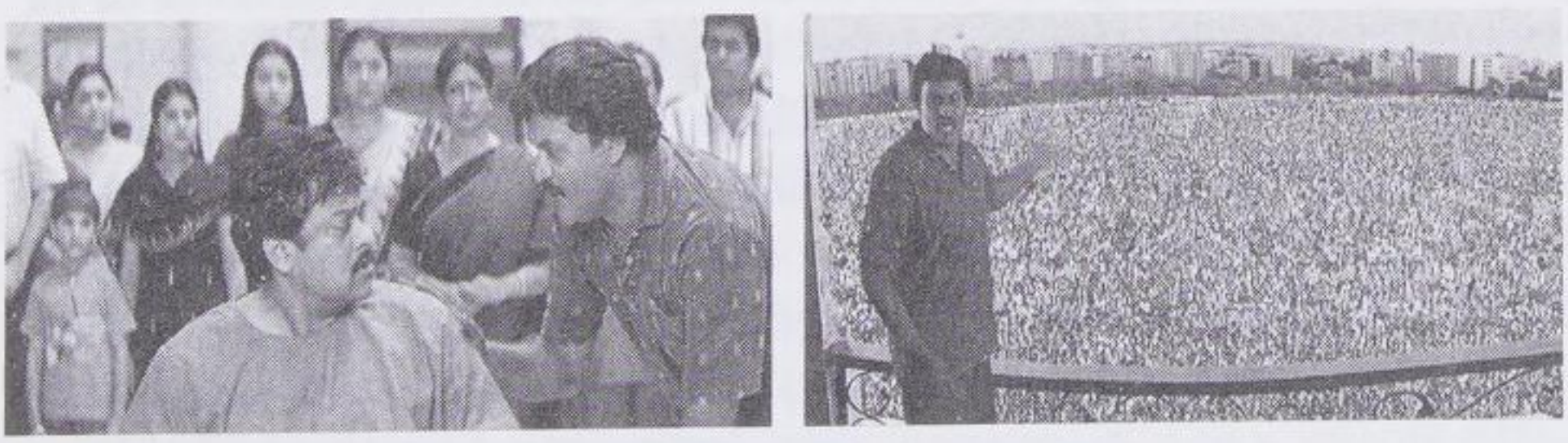
When Stalin regains consciousness, he thanks the autorickshaw driver who promptly tells him to help three people, giving the hero the first hint of the success of his endeavour. Gopi then goes on to introduce Stalin to his constituency, the size of which the latter is, of course, unaware of. Gopi asks, 'Do you know who saved you?' He goes on to give the answer by drawing the curtain to reveal the crowd outside the large glass window: 'These people, their love'. He

points to the crowd—the proof of his good work according to Gopi—at a distance which cheers audibly on sighting Stalin on his wheel chair. Stalin folds his hands to the camera, with tears in his eyes. He has finally made visual contact with the crowd, by looking into the camera. The society at large has been transformed into a community of his admirers/followers.

The hero's death is willed away in a moment of irrationality, but without the deployment of the usual sound and editing techniques associated with it. Throughout the fascinating climax of this film Stalin is comatose—dead for all practical purposes. The crowd, like the film's spectator, finds itself re-inscribed in the figure of Gopi, speaking on its behalf but also *relaying* the wishes of the crowd. Whereas in the 1990s mass film, especially *Big Boss*, the camera-spectator does not have an on-screen equivalent that establishes contact between the diegetic masses and the star protagonist, Gopi now performs that critical function. Here, too, the omniscient camera unifies diverse groups of



Stalin's Moment of Irrationality: While Stalin lies comatose, Gopi tells the doctor, 'Do you think you are god? … His heart belongs to ten crore people'. Religious communities pray for his recovery.



'Do you know who saved you? … These people.'

people, naming/identifying them as members of Stalin's constituency. People are mobilized, in part, not only through television and the gather before screens, but also well beyond the reach of television (for example, the shots of religious communities offering prayers). The hero, does not know any of this, and beyond a point, neither does Gopi, but the latter will nevertheless pass on vital information about this mobilization to Stalin. The friend/admirer thus demonstrates to the idol the extent of his stardom.

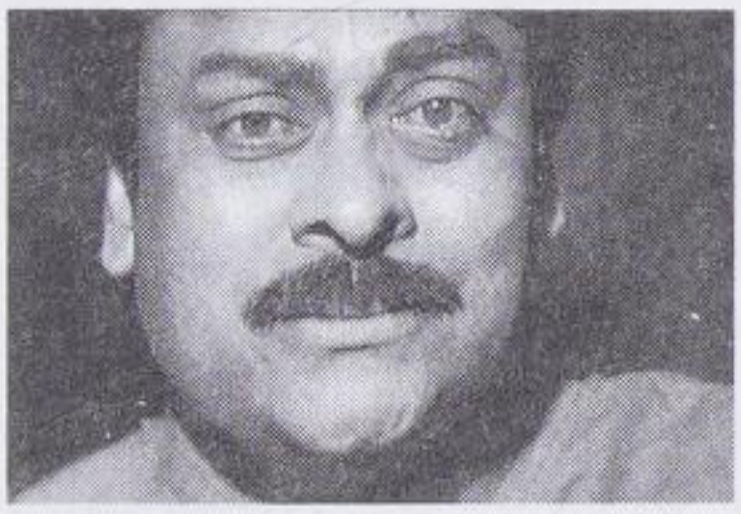
In Gopi, we notice the transformation of the figure of the fan, who was a regular fixture of the mass film throughout the 1990s, into a closer approximation of the genre's spectator. This figure does not have to be a 'fan' in the older imagination of the entity. For example, in the 1990s, the diegetic fan/sidekick would typically demand, '*song yesko*' (play/sing us a song), and the hero would, of course, sing. In *Stalin,* he is more central to the actual organization of the climax and far more 'responsible'. This is, perhaps, only to be expected, in a context where the fan has become a blood and eye donor.

Of greater interest than the correspondences between actual fans out there and the fan in the film, is the fact of his re-inscription as the willing diegetic spectator who increasingly takes the form of crowds of supporters that rally behind the cause espoused by the hero. More importantly, he is the *addressee* of the new mass film, which in spite of everything that has changed, continues to incite the viewer into its characteristic forms of obsessive engagement, arousing passions that will revive the dead, because the star cannot fade away.

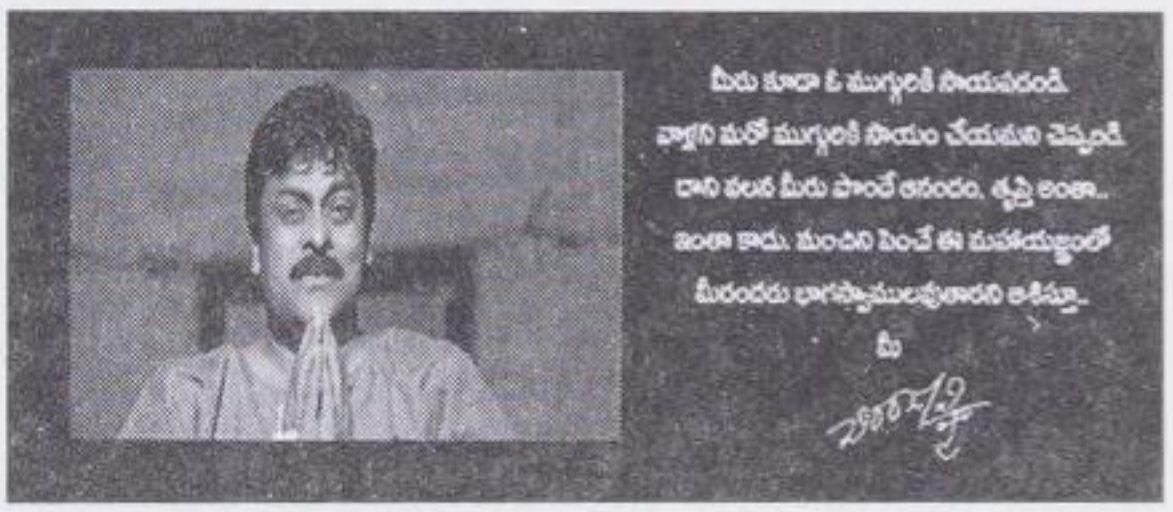
What is political in all this? It is but logical for a campaign film to be loaded with propagandist messages and be burdened with the responsibility of presenting the star as a leader figure of substance. But, as I have tried to show, the campaign film was assembled in response to, and as a means of negotiating, a blockage that the cinema encounters. In Chiranjeevi, politics found a new mobilizer and possibly an agent of a major realignment in Andhra Pradesh. Mass film's prior gesture towards politics extended the genre's life, as also the continuing relevance of its stars. With specific reference to *Stalin*, the film makes obvious political statements with its story that is an elaborately plotted pretext to produce an altruistic figure who is, presumably, modelled on the star himself. The on-screen demonstration of the star's benevolence and magnitude of the support of everyone who can be counted as Telugu, and the 'message' at the very end of the film, too, can be read as constituting a political statement. The timing, too, was significant: in mid-2006, the

apex organisation of the Kapu caste declared that it was not difficult for Chiranjeevi to become Chief Minister (Online 2006a: 3). By December 2006, at least one major newspaper had announced that the star's entry into politics was immanent (Online 2006b: 1). Within weeks of this report, the President of Loksatta welcomed the star into his party (Online 2006c: 3). Time and time again we get the impression on-screen and off it, that the star is just a formal announcement away from an election campaign. In this atmosphere, the final message of the film comes across as particularly loaded with political significance. The film ends with a freeze frame of the Chiranjeevi character folding his hands at the camera with a text message endorsed by the signature of the star himself. Chiranjeevi, speaking as himself, reads out the text, which requests the viewers to help three others, a plea for the carry-over of spectatorial credulousness into real life perhaps.

Stalin: Signing off as Chiranjeevi



Stalin sees the crowd.



The film's 'message': Help three people and ask them to help three others …

In retrospect, it becomes possible for us to see that Chiranjeevi's most recent work, including *Indra*, *Tagore*, and *Stalin*, repeatedly makes a distinction, traceable to *Mutha Mestri* in Chiranjeevi's own career, between the ruler (*palakudu*) and leader (*nayakudu*). The star is the *nayakudu*/leader of the masses and he confronts, on their behalf, the *palakudu*/ruler: a minister, a governor, or a factionist-politician who is a ruler twice over. As far as contemporary popular cinema goes, the production of the ruler, as villain, is so obvious that it almost goes unnoticed. But in the run up to the official announcement, Chiranjeevi's family, which orchestrated the campaign at this stage, began to make a distinction between the current crop of *rulers*, who were characterized by corruption and nepotism, and true *leaders*, who worked for the people.[37]

The lingering problem, however, is that of (dis)continuity between fiction and life. Films everywhere, and especially in this part of the world, have always been packed with intertextual riddles which invite

viewers to make connections between screen image and biography, fiction and reality. The availability and suitability of this practice to present the star as a political leader, is neither surprising nor illuminative of what, if at all, makes the star's films political. Without doubt, the assumption that such cross-referencing has political utility is founded on the faith that viewers are naïve enough to believe what they see. What then can the star carry-over from films to politics, in a world where we are painfully aware that films always end, returning us to the all too real world?

Conclusion

The cinema has historically emerged as a space where social conflict and differences were acted out, resolved, and managed. Post-NTR, Telugu cinema threw up a star that bridged the otherwise unbridgeable gap between citizenship and subjection. This political project was, in itself, unlikely to have been a new one for the cinema, but it was now accomplished by the institution of a particular kind of spectator who bore a close resemblance to the fan, *is* indeed a fan who is invested in the film and its star. The agenda of the mass film has never been the upliftment or the transformation of the abject subject into a citizen. Instead, it has resolved the problem of citizenship by the creation of a leader marked by his distinction, even as he straddles the positions of pure subjection to the political order and supreme agency that brooks no challenge because he acts on behalf of the spectator, at her command, and for her pleasure.

Given this history of cinema, it is hardly surprising that Chiranjeevi would emerge into the political area as everybody's man, a claim that could easily be substantiated by his films—mass films—singularly dedicated to producing precisely such a transcendental figure. His films allow us to see from where the man who knows his *ganji* and *benji* comes.

What was the star carrying over from his film career? Chiranjeevi's film career suggests that his problem, and the problem for us to ponder over, is not the image trap as we have known it, but the *imagi chatram*, as Telugu film critics would have it—where the image is framed, bound, limited by the *motivated credulousness* of the fan-spectator. Chiranjeevi, like his closest competitor Balakrishna, is welded to his screen image and cannot but do what he has always been doing: playing the super-citizen, on- and off-screen. It is not as if the fan cannot distinguish between fiction and reality. I have tried to show how the

fan resolutely refuses to accept that there can be a separation between the two, especially, if such a separation threatens to destabilize the fan-star relationship, which, in turn, is founded on a complex set of entitlements and obligations. The star is not merely a god or king to be worshiped or obeyed—all of these he may indeed be—but also someone who dances to the fan's whistles.

The blockage is thus pregnant with possibilities. After fifteen years of rumours and predictions, the star finally made the announcement that everyone knew all along was going to be made. It is possible that all along, the star plotted his career, inserting cues that would trigger-off speculation, assessing the situation on a film-to-film basis, to culminate in a moment that was, in all likelihood, decided in consultation with political and astrological pundits. Given the mass film, however, it is also entirely possible that Chiranjeevi came to the conclusion that the only way around the blockage was the exit from the industry and the end of his film career. After all, he cannot be revived from the dead in film after film.

A star like Chiranjeevi brings to the electoral arena, his history of acting according to spectatorial injunction. The promise of the star-politician is, as always, to fulfil our fantasies. These are now explicitly political, but there is no qualitative difference in the circuit of expectation and fulfilment. How he will act out his role as the pivot of a cinematic populism in the electoral arena, remains to be seen.

There are already signs (by September 2008) that the star, as politician, will be under considerable pressure, due to the sheer weight of the palimpsest of images that have, in fact, gathered the multitudes around him, to present himself as transcending sectoral interests. Months before he announced his political agenda, he was handed over the task of representing Dalits and backward castes, and, by implication, proving that he was indeed everybody's man, in spite of his caste-class status. Others had spoken and decided on his behalf. In less than a month after the launch of the Praja Rajyam Party, some clues of what kind of an entity this former fan club would be, became available. In spite of the decade long effort at cadreizing fans, there was no evidence that the newly established party had the structure, chain of command, or even cadres capable of accomplishing routinely assigned tasks that political parties have. Seasoned politicians declared that they had figured Chiranjeevi out: he had no agenda or ideas but those stolen from existing parties. Why should a party without a manifesto exist?

The star offered the story level explanation that his party was still in its infancy and needed time to draw up its plan of action. This was no excuse at all. Simultaneously, however, he reminded critics and followers, alike, of his uniqueness: *he had no agenda*. In a speech to well-wishers who came to greet him, Chiranjeevi reportedly said that he had no manifesto and no political background. His job was to find out what the people wanted and act accordingly. He added that he was a blank paper on which the people could write their agendas and invited them to do so (Online 2008e: 9), implying that any agenda that we willed into existence, would become his.

There are other signs that the credulous spectator's structure of belief has political relevance, suggesting that Chiranjeevi's attempt at replicating NTR's performance is not being read as inappropriate. A survey commissioned by a Telugu satellite television channel revealed that 60 per cent of the respondents wanted Chiranjeevi to enter politics. Seventy-four per cent thought that corruption would come down if he was elected to power and 61 per cent thought political representation of all castes would increase. Hundred per cent of the respondents in coastal AP and 97 per cent in the other two regions knew who he was. Good news indeed for Chiranjeevi. But here is something that demonstrates the banality of the Megastar. Fifty-seven per cent of respondents thought film stars were capable of running a government, 6 per cent thought they were not, and 31 per cent were undecided (Online 2008b: 8). Chiranjeevi is our man all right, but we are willing to trust any star who arrives on the scene. And soon enough, Balakrishna and NTR Jr. launched their own 'road shows' for the TDP, reminding us all over again of the film star who started it all by deciding to retire as a politician.

The crucial breakthrough achieved by Telugu cinema and its stars, in the very films that returned Chiranjeevi to the industry's centre in this century, was to inscribe a specific mode of viewing into films that were destined for viewing beyond the cinema hall (on televisions, in pirated versions) and far beyond the state of Andhra Pradesh. This critical development occurred at a time when the future of celluloid, as well as the unity of Andhra Pradesh had been called into question. Telugu films could well outlive Andhra Pradesh and the cinema hall, with the small screen facilitating new forms of cinephilia, eternally looping around 'home', which was a genre, a star, and also, of course, a geographical entity (Andhra Pradesh) that is lost and a community that is a memory. The industry's struggle for survival has, as we know all too well by now,

had a politically significant consequence, or, shall we say, side-effect: the return of the star-politician.

Here, then, is a short description of Telugu cinema: it is a cinema in the Telugu language made with borrowed plots, for ten crore speakers of the language, by an industry that makes politicians because it cannot make profits.

Chiranjeevi's Filmography (Telugu, Hindi, and Kannada)

No.	Title	Director	Year of release
1.	*Pranam Khareedu*	K. Vasu	1978
2.	*Manavuri Pandavulu*	Bapu	1978
3.	*Tayaramma Bangarayya*	Kommineni	1979
4.	*Kukkakatuku Cheppudebba*	Eeranki Sarma	1979
5.	*Kottalludu*	P. Sambasiva Rao	1979
6.	*I Love You*	Vayunandana Rao	1979
7.	*Punadirallu*	Rajkumar	1979
8.	*Idi Kadhakadu*	K. Balachander	1979
9.	*Sriramabantu*	I.S. Murthy	1979
10.	*Kotalarayudu*	K. Vasu	1979
11.	*Agni Samskaram*	G.V. Prabhakar	1980
12.	*Kothapeta Rowdy*	P. Sambasiva Rao	1980
13.	*Chandipriya*	V. Madhusudhana Rao	1980
14.	*Aarani Mantalu*	K. Vasu	1980
15.	*Jatara*	Dhavala Satyam	1980
16.	*Mosagadu*	K. Raghavendra Rao	1980
17.	*Punnami Nagu*	Rajasekhar	1980
18.	*Nakili Manishi*	S.D. Lal	1980
19.	*Kali*	I.V. Sasi	1980
20.	*Tatayya Premaleelalu*	B.V. Prasad	1980
21.	*Love in Singapore*	O.S.R. Anjaneeyulu	1980
22.	*Prematarangalu*	S.P. Chittibabu	1980

23.	*Mogudu Kavali*	Katta Subba Rao	1980
24.	*Ratka Bandham*	Aaluri Ravi	1980
25.	*Aadavallu Meeku Joharlu*	K. Balachander	1981
26.	*Parvati Parameshwarulu*	M.S. Kota Reddy	1981
27.	*Todudongalu*	K. Vasu	1981
28.	*Tiruguleni Manishi*	K. Raghavendra Rao	1981
29.	*Premanatakam*	Katta Subba Rao	1981
30.	*Nyayam Kavali*	A. Kodandarami Reddy	1981
31.	*Oorikichinamata*	M. Balaiah	1981
32.	*Ranikasula Rangamma*	T.L.V. Prasad	1981
33.	*47 Rojulu*	K. Balachander	1981
34.	*Priya*	S.P. Chittibabu	1981
35.	*Srirastu Subhamastu*	Katta Subba Rao	1981
36.	*Chattaniki Kallu Levu*	S.A. Chandrasekhar	1981
37.	*Kirayi Rowdilu*	A. Kodandarami Reddy	1981
38.	*Intlo Ramayya Veedhilo Krishnyya*	Kodi Ramakrishna	1982
39.	*Bandipotu Simham*	S.P. Muthu Raman	1982
40.	*Subhalekha*	K. Vishwanath	1982
41.	*Idi Pellantara?*	Vijaya Bhaskar	1982
42.	*Sitadevi*	Eeranki Sarma	1982
43.	*Radha My Darling*	B. Bhaskar	1982
44.	*Tingurangadu*	Tatineni Prasad	1982
45.	*Patnamvachina Pativratalu*	Mauli	1982
46.	*Billa Ranga*	K.S.R. Doss	1982
47.	*Yamakinkarudu*	Raj Bharath	1982
48.	*Mondighatam*	Raja Chandra	1982
49.	*Manchupallaki*	Vamsi	1982
50.	*Bandhalu Anubandhalu*	Bhargava	1982
51.	*Premapichollu*	A. Kodandarami Reddy	1983
52.	*Palleturi Monagadu*	S.A. Chandrasekhar	1983
53.	*Abhilasha*	A. Kodandarami Reddy	1983
54.	*Aalaya Sikharam*	Kodi Ramakrishna	1983
55.	*Sivudu Sivudu Sivudu*	A. Kodandarami Reddy	1983
56.	*Puli Bebbuli*	K.S.R. Doss	1983
57.	*Goodachari No.1*	Kodi Ramakrishna	1983
58.	*Magamaharaju*	Vijay Bapineedu	1983
59.	*Roshagadu*	K.S.R. Doss	1983
60.	*Maayinti Premayanam*	Aaluri Ravi	1983
61.	*Simhapuri Simham*	Kodi Ramakrishna	1983

62.	*Khaidi*	A. Kodandarami Reddy	1983
63.	*Mantrigari Viyyankudu*	Bapu	1983
64.	*Sangharshana*	K. Murali Mohan Rao	1983
65.	*Allulosthunnaru Jagratta*	K. Vasu	1984
66.	*Goonda*	A. Kodandarami Reddy	1984
67.	*Hero*	Vijay Bapineedu	1984
68.	*Devanthakudu*	S.A. Chandrasekhar	1984
69.	*Mahanagaramlo Mayagadu*	Vijay Bapineedu	1984
70.	*Challenge*	A. Kodandarami Reddy	1984
71.	*Intiguttu*	K. Bapaiah	1984
72.	*Nagu*	Tatineni Prasad	1984
73.	*Agnigundam*	Kranti Kumar	1984
74.	*Rustum*	A. Kodandarami Reddy	1984
75.	*Chattamto Pooratam*	K. Bapaiah	1985
76.	*Donga*	A. Kodandarami Reddy	1985
77.	*Chiranjeevi*	C.V. Rajendran	1985
78.	*Jwala*	Ravi Raja Pinisetty	1985
79.	*Puli*	Raj Bharath	1985
80.	*Rakta Sindhuram*	A. Kodandarami Reddy	1985
81.	*Adavi Donga*	K. Raghavendra Rao	1985
82.	*Vijeta*	A. Kodandarami Reddy	1985
83.	*Kiratakudu*	A. Kodandarami Reddy	1986
84.	*Kondaveeti Raja*	K. Raghavendra Rao	1986
85.	*Maghadheerudu*	Vijay Bapineedu	1986
86.	*Veta*	A. Kodandarami Reddy	1986
87.	*Chantabbai*	Jandhyala	1986
88.	*Rakshasudu*	A. Kodandarami Reddy	1986
89.	*Dhairyavanthudu*	P. Lakshmi Deepak	1986
90.	*Chanakya Sapadham*	K. Raghavendra Rao	1986
91.	*Donga Mogudu*	A. Kodandarami Reddy	1987
92.	*Aradhana*	Bharathi Raja	1987
93.	*Chakravarthy*	Ravi Raja Pinisetty	1987
94.	*Pasivadi Pranam*	A. Kodandarami Reddy	1987
95.	*Swayamkrushi*	K. Vishwanath	1987
96.	*Jebudonga*	A. Kodandarami Reddy	1987
97.	*Manchi Donga*	K. Raghavendra Rao	1988
98.	*Rudraveena*	K. Balachander	1988
99.	*Yamudiki Mogudu*	Ravi Raja Pinisetty	1988
100.	*Khaidi No. 786*	Vijay Bapineedu	1988
101.	*Maranamrudangam*	A. Kodandarami Reddy	1988

102.	*Trinetrudu*	A. Kodandarami Reddy	1988
103.	*Yudhabhoomi*	K. Raghavendra Rao	1988
104.	*Attaku Yamudu Ammayiki Mogudu*	A. Kodandarami Reddy	1989
105.	*State Rowdy*	B. Gopal	1989
106.	*Rudranetra*	K. Raghavendra Rao	1989
107.	*Lankeshwarudu*	Dasari Narayana Rao	1989
108.	*Kondaveeti Donga*	A. Kodandarami Reddy	1990
109.	*Jagadeka Veerudu Atiloka Sundari*	K. Raghavendra Rao	1990
110.	*Kodama Simham*	K. Murali Mohan Rao	1990
111.	*Pratibandh* (Hindi)	Ravi Raj	1990
112.	*Raja Vikramarka*	Ravi Raja Pinisetty	1990
113.	*Stuartpuram Police Station*	Yendamuri Veerandranath	1991
114.	*Gangleader*	Vijay Bapineedu	1991
115.	*Rowdy Alludu*	K. Raghavendra Rao	1991
116.	*Gharana Mogudu*	K. Raghavendra Rao	1992
117.	*Aaj Ka Goondaraj* (Hindi)	Ravi Raj	1992
118.	*Aapadbandhavudu*	K. Vishwanath	1992
119.	*Mutha Mestri*	A. Kodandarami Reddy	1993
120.	*Mechanic Alludu*	B. Gopal	1993
121.	*Mugguru Monagallu*	K. Raghavendra Rao	1994
122.	*S.P. Parasuram*	Ravi Raja Pinisetty	1994
123.	*The Gentleman* (Hindi)	Mahesh Bhatt	1994
124.	*Alluda Majaka*	E.V.V. Sathyanarayana	1995
125.	*Big Boss*	Vijay Bapineedu	1995
126.	*Rickshawvodu*	Kodi Ramakrishna	1995
127.	*Hitler*	Mutyala Subbaiah	1997
128.	*Master*	Suresh Krissna	1997
129.	*Bavagaru Bagunnara*	Jayanth C. Paranji	1998
130.	*Choodalani Vundi*	Gunasekhar	1998
131.	*Sneham Kosam*	K.S. Ravikumar	1999
132.	*Iddaru Mitrulu*	K. Raghavendra Rao	1999
133.	*Annayya*	Mutyala Subbaiah	2000
134.	*Mrugaraju*	Gunasekhar	2001
135.	*Sri Manjunatha (Kannada/Telugu)*	K. Raghavendra Rao	2001
136.	*Daddy*	Suresh Krissna	2001
137.	*Indra*	B. Gopal	2002
138.	*Tagore*	V.V. Vinyak	2003

139.	*Anji*	Kodi Ramakrishna	2003
140.	*Shankar Dada MBBS*	Jayanth C. Paranji	2004
141.	*Andarivadu*	Sreenu Vytla	2005
142.	*Jai Chiranjeeva*	Vijaya Bhaskar	2005
143.	*Stalin*	A.R. Murugadoss	2006
144.	*Shankar Dada Zindabad*	Prabhu Deva	2007

Supporting Roles/Cameos

145.	*Sipayi* (Kannada, Supporting Role)	V. Ravichandran	1996
146.	*Style* (Telugu, Cameo)	Raghavendra Lawrence	2006

Source: Super Hit 30 August 1996 (for films released up to 1996); Srikanth Kumar (2004); Idlebrain.com (http://www.idlebrain.com/celeb/starhomes/chiranjeevi/filmography.html, last visited on 15 September 2008); and Internet Movie Database (http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0158112/, last visited on 15 September 2008).

Notes

1. Whistling Fans and Conditional Loyalty

1. Kerala and Malayalam cinema, in spite of assertions of the unique status of both vis-à-vis the rest of the region, are *not* an exception when it comes to fans' associations. Recent research has drawn attention to fan activity in Kerala. See for example, Radhakrishnan 2002 and Osella and Osella 2004.
2. Legend has it that NTR began his charitable activities in the early 1950s itself. Nandamuri Lakshmiparvathy, who makes no mention of Tamil precedents to NTR's charitable activities, begins her two-part biography of NTR with a 1965 tour of Andhra by NTR with a group of film industry representatives to perform plays in aid of India's war effort with Pakistan (Lakshmiparvathy 2004a: 1–3). A similar tour was conducted by MGR around this time to raise money for the Prime Minister's Defence Fund (Hardgrave 1979: 98). Hardgrave points out that by the early 1960s, there was competition between MGR and Sivaji Ganesan even in carrying out donations and other charitable activities, which were of course well publicized.
3. Violence between fans was common from the late-1970s and early 1980s when fans of NTR and Krishna and Sobhan Babu repeatedly confronted each other with deadly results. An incident of violence between fans in East Godavari district, which apparently resulted in the death of two fans, is referred to by a reader of a film journal (Sudarsan Rao 1982: 48).
4. Kannala (1986) expresses surprise that minor stars too had fans' associations in the 1980s, implying that this was not the case in the past. Other observers like the journalists K. Narasaiah and G. Srihari stated in their interviews with me that the growth of fans' associations witnessed in the 1980s was unprecedented.

5. These are based on figures attributed to R. Swamy Naidu, General Secretary, Rashtra Chiranjeevi Yuvatha by a report in *The Hindu* (Hyderabad edition, 12 December 2006: 2). Naidu was quoted by a 2001 report as stating that there were 7500 associations dedicated to Chiranjeevi (*The New Indian Express*, Hyderabad edition, 18 July 2001. Full text of article available on: http://www.cscsarchive.org/MediaArchive/art.nsf/(docid)/6374104BD035F877E5256B570037A4BA). In 1995, the film director Vijay Bapineedu, then the editor of the official Chiranjeevi fan magazine, *Megastar Chiranjeevi*, estimated there were 3000 associations. However, even in the mid-1990s some fans' association members I spoke to thought this figure was too conservative.
6. Chiranjeevi fans in USA had reportedly rallied around to establish the Progressive Telugu Forum, which called upon the star to enter politics and provide a corruption-free government (Online 2008a: 9).
7. C. Srikanth Kumar states in his biography of Chiranjeevi, that the office bearers of the apex body of the Rashtra Chiranjeevi Yuvatha were formally announced in 1996 by Chiranjeevi, Allu Aravind, and Nagendra Babu (Srikanth Kumar 2004: 217). The organization itself was operational in 1995.
8. Reported in *The Hindu*, Metro Plus, Hyderabad edition, 12 December 2006: 1. References to rioting by fans also began to be made in films, for example, *Aata* (V.N. Adithya 2007) in which the hero has to fight his way past the local gang to prevent a riot by ensuring that the print of a new release reaches the cinema hall on time.
9. In 2007 and 2008, Chiranjeevi fans carried out state wide protests against film stars, Mohan Babu (see Venkata Rao 2007) and Rajasekhar (see Jafri 2008), respectively for innocuous comments made by them which were seen as being insulting to the star. Rajasekhar was allegedly attacked by a group of Chiranjeevi fans in January 2008. This incident caused minor injuries to one of the actor's daughters and resulted in a personal apology by Chiranjeevi.
10. I will leave the question of the complex relationship between language (spoken on screen) and the discursive construction of a 'Telugu' spectator by Telugu cinema out of the discussion in this book for reasons of focus. I discussed the issue with reference to NTR's films in Srinivas 2006a.
11. For an analysis of the agitations for separate Telangana and Andhra states in the 1960s–70s, see Hugh Gray (1971 and 1974). See also Jadhav (1997) for an argument about the importance of the movement for a separate Telangana state in this period.
12. Lakshmiparvathy (2004b: 46) claims that between October 1982 and January 1983 alone NTR travelled for 21 hours a day, covering 35,000 kilometres by road. During the campaign, he is reported to have addressed innumerable well-attended meetings.

13. Balagopal (1988) offers interesting insights into the range of agitations and mobilizations during the 1980s. His book is a collection of essays published by the author in *Economic and Political Weekly* between 1982 and 1987.
14. According to M.L. Kantha Rao, who has worked on the socio-political mobility of the Kapus in Andhra Pradesh, they comprise 17 per cent of the state's population. There are four major Kapu sub-castes: Telaga, Balija, Munnuru Kapu, and Turpu Kapu. Of these, the last two are classified as Other Backward Castes (OBCs). See Kantha Rao (1999) and Rami Reddy (1989) for more information on Kapus and their role in the state's politics.
15. For details of Chiranjeevi's films discussed in the book see the star's filmography.
16. See for example the fascinating study of Dalit fans of Telugu stars by Keshav Kumar (2007).
17. For example, a newspaper reported that Nagendra Babu, who has been the honorary president of the apex body of fans, 'inaugurated' statues dedicated to both Ambedkar and Mother Teresa during his visit to Krishna and Guntur districts (*Andhra Jyothi*, Bangalore Edition, 23 February 2008: 8).
18. Ranga was murdered in 1988 while on a fast demanding protection from political rivals who, he alleged, were plotting to kill him. Nehru happens to be one of the accused in the murder.
19. For an account of the city's gangs and politics, see Parthasarathy (1997).
20. While Ranga was elected as a Municipal Corporator on a Congress party ticket in 1981, Nehru was elected to the state assembly on a TDP ticket in 1983. In the 1985 mid-term election, both were elected to the assembly on Congress and TDP tickets respectively (Parthasarathy 1997: 161).
21. A whole generation of youth was politically socialized by rival student unions, United Independents (UI), and United Students' Organization (USO) owing allegiance to Ranga and Nehru respectively.
22. *The Hindu* (2004).
23. *The Times of India* (2004).
24. From the late 1970s, new stars and stars in the making have been acquiring FAs long before they established themselves. The dance choreographer turned actor and director Lawrence, now Raghavendra Lawrence, had at least one FA, months before the very first film in which he was cast as a hero was released. By this time, he had featured in only one dance sequence but his fans declared that he would surpass the dancing sensation Prabhu Deva (*Tara Sitara*, April 1997, Centre Spread).
25. The recording dance is a popular dance form in which stage artistes imitate and improvise the dances of film stars while the song (the 'record') is played on a turntable. Baskaran (1996) calls it the 'poor man's cabaret'

(p. 54). Recording dances are now banned in Andhra Pradesh as the troupes inevitably performed 'obscene' numbers. There are also allegations that the performance, itself, is a front for prostitution. Despite the ban, the chief attraction of the largest *Sivaratri jatra* in the state at Kotappa Konda, is the recording dance. See the film *Sri Kanakamahalakshmi Recording Dance Troupe* (Vamsy 1988) for a hilarious but sympathetic account of the adventures of a recording dance troupe.

26. Interview, Vijayawada, 20 July 1994. Vijayalakshmi said that she had heard about another all-female association of Vijayashanti but was unable to make contact.
27. Notice for example the fact that a considerable part of Telugu language television time is dedicated to programmes in which viewers' fandom is 'tested' in film related song, dance, and mimicry competitions. Simultaneously, organized fan activity itself is mediated by television with satellite channels like Maa TV telecasting such events as hundred day functions, audio releases etc. which continue to be occasions when fans gather in strength.
28. These were groups not on talking terms in March 2001, when I spent some evenings with them. This was apparently because of insulting comments made by members of the Balakrishna associations about Chiranjeevi's *Mrugaraju*, a box office disaster. Chiranjeevi fans thought that Balakrishna fans were misbehaving because of the phenomenal success of Balakrishna's *Narasimha Naidu* (B. Gopal 2001), which was released on the same day as *Mrugaraju*. Eventually both groups stated that there was no enmity between them.
29. These discussions were among members of All India Chiranjeevi Youth Cultural Association, Vijayawada, and, Akhilandhra Chiranjeevi Yuvata, Hyderabad in 1995, and the Koneru Gattu Chiranjeevi fans in Tirupathi in 2001.
30. Compare Dickey (1993) for a discussion of similar activities in Tamil Nadu.
31. During the course of my interactions with fans belonging to Akhilandhra Chiranjeevi Yuvatha in Hyderabad, I came to know that the night show of the hundredth day of *Gharana Mogudu* (1992) ended in a riot when the theatre management (Sandhya 70 mm, Hyderabad) refused to repeat a song for the third time as demanded by fans.
32. For some useful information on the star, see the fan site: http://www.sirigina.com/krishna/index.asp. Last visited on 27 May 2005.
33. The film has the younger star, Nagarjuna, holding Krishna by the collar in the course of an argument. Despite the initial controversy, the film went on to become a box office hit. Fans were evidently pacified by Krishna's appeals. This incident found an interesting echo recently when fans of Nagarjuna went on a riot in Kakinada protesting against his role in *Krishnarjuna* (P. Vasu 2008), a film in which he co-starred with the younger Vishnu.

One website reported that Nagarjuna fans 'took objection to some dialogues against Nagarjuna [character] made by Vishnu [character]'. Nagarjuna fans ransacked the theatre and 'even forced the management to stop screening the film'. http://www.bharatwaves.com/movie_news/article-11623.html, visited on 29 February 2008. Another website reported that Nagarjuna fans demanded that the star '*not do any guest role in future.*' http://www.telugustyle.com/newsdetails.asp?articleid=1643, visited on 29 February 2008.

34. A reproduction of the advertisement is available on the CSCS Media Archive: http://apache.cscsarchive.org/Hongkong_Action/html/fans_01.htm. Visited on 25 August 2008.
35. I am grateful to K. Balaji, an aspiring director, for bringing industry grapevine to my notice.
36. This was confirmed by Chiranjeevi fans in Hyderabad, who said fans in Visakhapatnam had prevented the screening of the film. There is an interesting twist to the story of fans' rejection of the film, which is discussed below.
37. Vulisetty Anjaneeyulu (see his official stationery in Fig. 4) recounts that fans in his home-town Aravapalem, East Godavari district, hired a taxi and travelled all the way to Madras to meet the producer and ensure that *Kondaveeti Raja* (1986) would run for hundred days when the distributor withdrew the film a week or so before this landmark was reached. The film was re-released after a gap of a few days because the producer obliged (Interview, Hyderabad, 13 November 1996). Vulisetty Anjaneeyulu was introduced to me as a special fan by Swamy Naidu, the then Secretary of the apex organization of Chiranjeevi fans. Apparently Anjaneeyulu, upon failing to meet Chiranjeevi in 1996 on the occasion of the star's birthday (22 August), stayed back in Hyderabad for months, working as a motor mechanic to support himself. He returned home only after meeting the star.
38. Balakrishna fans in Vijayawada allegedly burnt the office of Vyjayanthi Films in 1993 because the star's *Bangaru Bullodu* (Ravi Raja Pinisetty 1993) was withdrawn three weeks or so before the hundredth day, despite an agreement being reached to share losses. The distributor's office and fans concerned have, of course, denied the latter's involvement in the incident.
39. In Sivathamby's words,

    > The Cinema Hall was the first performance centre in which all Tamils sat under the same roof. The basis of the seating is not on the hierarchic position of the patron but essentially on his purchasing power. If he cannot afford paying the higher rate, he has either to keep away from the performance or be with 'all and sundry' (Sivathamby 1981: 18).

40. For instance, drama notices issued in Karikudi in what is now Tamil Nadu explicitly state that entry is prohibited for the members of 'Panchama'

or Dalit castes. These notices, housed in the Roja Muthaiah Research Library (RMRL), Chennai, date from 1891 to 1918. I am grateful to Mr S. Theodore Baskaran for bringing this material to my notice and Mr Sundar of RMRL for translating their texts for me.

41. Barnouw and Krishnaswamy (1980: 5) point out that separate enclosures for women were introduced within days of the first exhibition of films in India at Watson's Hotel, Bombay. Writings on cinema halls in the Andhra region, dating back to the 1940s and 1950s, frequently refer to partitions within each class. See for example Narayana (1951: 39) and other responses discussed in Srinivas 2000. By the 1970s, these partitions were no longer used in most urban cinema halls. In 2001, I came across a plush air-conditioned cinema hall in Madanapalle town in which male and female viewers continued to be segregated. The proprietor of the cinema hall was quite proud of this practice and felt it ensured that women felt safe.
42. When the police repeatedly caned crowds which had gathered in large numbers to catch a glimpse of the stars attending the hundred day function of *Balaraju* (G. Balaramaiah 1948), a *Roopavani* journalist stated that the violence was uncalled for and accused the police of acting at the behest of theatre management (Deshpande 1948: 68). Some years later a reader of the same magazine reported that the management of Poorna Theatre, Visakhapatnam, cane-charged the 9 anna ('Bench') audience which was already agitated that the screening of a newly released film began, even as people were buying tickets for this class (Ratiraju 1951: 39). Another alleged that the police were bribed to thrash to pulp anyone who 'rebelled' against the misdeeds of the management (*Roopavani* June 1952: 32). Yet another wrote about an incident in which theatre staff beat up students. He went on to add that the management had these students arrested when they retaliated (Krishna 1952: 60).
43. See for example, *Madras Mail*, 28 May 1938: 12; *Cinema Uzghagam* (Tamil), 1:19 (18 August 1935), 13; and *Roopavani* (Telugu), December 1946: 27. In 1951, after publishing a spate of letters on cinema halls, the influential Telugu film journal *Roopavani* introduced a regular feature called '*Andhra Pradeshlo Cinema Theatrelu*' ('Cinema Theatres in Andhra Pradesh') in which readers wrote about the conditions in local theatres (*Roopavani*, July 1951).
44. See the instances identified by Pandian 1992: 18 n2, n3, n4; 117n87; 130n103, n104; 131n105, n107; 143n126 and n127, and, also Dickey 1993b: 191n10.
45. By the early part of this century, peace was established between the two sides. This was made possible by some concessions, such as quotas for fans during opening days of a film's release. Apart from disciplinary efforts by stars and 'strong' responses, the local police played no small part in the emergence of a consensus. Even in places where fans were not drawn into active politics, similar changes seem to have been witnessed by the end of

the 1990s. In Madanapalle, Venkat Sekhar Prasad, President, Nandamuri Yuvakishoram Balakrishna Fans Townwide, told me that, as a part of a negotiated settlement with a theatre's management, fans could whistle and cheer during the opening week but not later. Noisy customers were thrown out of the cinema hall by its management after the first week (Interview, 9 February 2001).

46. Interview, Hyderabad, 8 January 1995.
47. Rama Rao, the Circle Inspector of the Five-Town Police Station, Vijayawada (Interview, Vijayawada, 21 July 1994). About a third of Vijayawada's fifty odd theatres come under the jurisdiction of this police station. The rowdies he was referring to were involved in serious criminal cases and faced charges of murder. None of the cases were related to fan activity.
48. Compare Ranajit Guha's discussion of peasant insurgency, which he argues is characterized by the attribution of peasants' own political agency to a higher authority (god). See, for example, the discussion of the Santal rebellion of 1855 in Guha (1983: 28).
49. Interview, Madras, 22 January 1995.
50. Reported in Telenews Notice the recurrence of the motif of the murder attempt in the lives of Indian stars. In the case of both MGR and Amitabh Bachchan, it was as if the star was brought back from the dead, due to the sheer will power of fans who just did not want him to die. Hardgrave Jr. (1973: 300–1) states that the alleged murder attempt revived MGR's flagging film career even as it won him his key election. Rajnikant's *Sivaji* (Shanker 2007) makes an interesting reference to the return of the star from the dead. In the case of both Chiranjeevi and NTR (who was attacked during a political rally in the late 1980s in an incident dismissed by his critics as a bad publicity stunt), there was no actual harm caused to the star in incidents referred to by his fans as murder attempts. I will have more to say about the filmic manifestations of a similarly structured relationship between fan and star in the later chapters.
51. Between 1995 and 1998, Chiranjeevi made frequent public appearances promoting charitable activities by fans. According to Srikanth Kumar, the Chiranjeevi Charitable Trust, established in 1983, came into limelight by organizing a meeting promoting blood and eye donation in 1995. In 1996, it was a prominent part of flood relief activities in different parts of the state (Srikanth Kumar 2004: 219). It is not clear if Kumar is referring to an organization that later became the Chiranjeevi Charitable Foundation which, according to its official website, was established on 2 October 1998, or another which continues to exist.
52. The only other official fan periodical in this period was the newsletter issued by Suman. It contains information about his forthcoming films, shooting schedules, stills from future releases, etc. and is distributed free of cost to his fans through the FAs. However, it is neither as ambitious nor as attractive as *Megastar Chiranjeevi*.

53. Information related to circulation and finances of the magazine has been provided by Allu Aravind (Interview, Madras, 23 January 1995).
54. In 1996–7, I had a number of informal conversations with one of the ghost editors of the magazine who had moved on to become a personal assistant of Chiranjeevi. His fondest recollections of his contribution to the magazine were the tables of 'records' (box office collections) of Chiranjeevi's hits in different parts of the state. Hardgrave (1979) notes that in the 1970s, too, fans of the Tamil superstars were engaged in compiling such 'records'. Since the 1990s, with the explosion of popular film magazines, fans of various stars have been sending in various kinds of records on special occasions such as the star's birthday. Claims on box office collections are at times based on statements by distributors and producers and at all times virtually impossible to verify because the film industry itself does not make such information available.
55. Aravind's observation returns us to the meaninglessness of fan activity yet again. In the 1990s, it became increasingly clear to the film industry that the economic worth of fan activity was limited, if not altogether negligible. There is no direct or even obvious correlation between fan activity and the profitability of a film. They are far too small a fraction of the general filmviewing public to determine the success a film and it is difficult to argue that their publicity material draws audiences to the cinema hall.
56. Among the other travellers (all of whom survived), were his 'rival' Balakrishna, father-in-law Allu Ramalingaiah, and Vijayashanti. This particular issue of the magazine needs to be read in the light of a major controversy in the Telugu press, both mainstream and popular, as well as among fan circles, triggered off by press reports that upon alighting from the plane, Chiranjeevi hugged his father-in-law and wept in relief. *Megastar Chiranjeevi* does not mention these reports or angry letters and statements by fans who claimed that the star *had not* wept, or the press statements by Chiranjeevi that he did not cry. Instead, it carried a series of eye-witness accounts of villagers who were supposedly present at the crash site. All of them reportedly presented Chiranjeevi as the hero of the crash. Srikanth Kumar (2004) begins his biography of Chiranjeevi with this incident (pp. 17–35), once again presenting the star as a real life hero.
57. I will return to the notion of the credulous spectator, which I borrow from Christian Metz (1982: 72–3), in some detail in the later chapters of the book.
58. Ravi Vasudevan, responding to my article (Srinivas 1996) in which the exchange between fan and star was discussed, wondered how authentic these letters were. I am grateful to Vasudevan for raising this question because it allows me to clarify the following: (a) as mentioned earlier in the chapter, fans do write letters threatening to kill themselves. The threat is therefore plausible in the general scheme of things. (b) In all likelihood the star did not write his own response and even the signature

could well be of the kind that is found on the ghost-writer's replies to fan-mail (printed at the bottom of a sheet of plain paper see Fig. 14). The point, however, is not the authenticity of the exchange, but the need for it. Chiranjeevi is an institution (and an individual, of course, but the latter is not of interest to me) like other stars. And Chiranjeevi is a far more efficiently managed institution than most other stars of his generation. Like fans, the constituents of the institution function in the star's name. The crucial difference is that the latter's use of the star's name is legitimate. Since I am interested in Chiranjeevi, the institution, I have ignored the fanzine's claim on more than one occasion, that it was autonomous and did not necessarily represent the views of the star. Returning to the present exchange between fan and star, I am willing to go along with the magazine's claim that such a letter was, in fact, written by a fan. However, even if an actual fan did write the letter, such a letter would no doubt have been produced sooner or later. The critical importance of the issue of credulousness to the ambitions of Chiranjeevi would have staged the exchange at some point.

59. A front-page report in *The Indian Express* (Hyderabad, 16 June 1997) stated that a Krishna fan, upon failing to meet the star, consumed poison and ended his life, unable to bear his disappointment. As we shall see in the next chapter, Chiranjeevi himself recalled a fan's suicide even as he announced his decision to enter politics in August 2008.
60. In my more recent research I found that the gap between on- and off-record statements on favourite films might be more characteristic of Chiranjeevi fans than those of some others, especially Balakrishna. Balakrishna fans in Tirupathi declared that their star had greater mass appeal than other stars and also had no problem identifying themselves as members of the mass audience. On the face of it, the predominantly lower class origins of the Balakrishna fans I spoke to in Tirupathi seemed responsible for this. However, Chiranjeevi fans in the same town, who had similar socio-economic backgrounds were relatively more conscious of the need to present themselves as being more refined. However, the claim to cultural distinction did not figure very prominently in the self-descriptions of Chiranjeevi fans who were too young to have been shaped by *Megastar Chiranjeevi*. Further, younger fans are not quite part of the moment (early to mid-1990) when the class film figured prominently in discussions of Telugu cinema and also the career of Chiranjeevi. As we shall see in Chapter 5, the mass audience, as a category (with attendant negative attributes), may be losing its importance in the light of the changes in the film industry.
61. For material on social service by Chiranjeevi fans, visit the CSCS Media Archive hosted on, www.cscsarchive.org. This digital archive has a wide selection of material related to fan activity in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. It also has some interesting examples from Tamil Nadu.

2. After NTR: Telugu Mass Film and Cinematic Populism

1. The film magazine, *Super Hit* is one of my most valuable sources of information and I cite it often throughout this book. The magazine, like a number of popular magazines, does not usually come with page numbers.
2. The exact number of films of each genre in a given year is difficult to determine. K. Narasaiah (1986, discussed below) is among the few film critics who commented on emerging generic tendencies. Going by the titles of films in the film industry's official filmography in Murari (nd) we can conclude that the mythological and folklore film were phased out by the late 1970s.
3. In the 1970s, NTR acted in the Telugu remakes of Bachchan vehicles, notably *Nippulanti Manishi* (S.D. Lal 1974) and later *Yugandhar* (K.S.R. Doss 1979), based on *Zanjeer* (Prakash Mehra 1973) and *Don* (Chandra Barot 1978), respectively.
4. I have discussed the film industry's business model in some detail in Srinivas (2006b). In Chapter 5, I return to the issue with specific reference to Chiranjeevi's career. Film critic, Srihari (1986 and 1992) points out that this model resulted in major losses for investors and also created sharp declines in film production, every once in a while.
5. Rajadhyaksha and Willemen (1999) report that in 1977 there were 99 Telugu productions, and in 1995 they grew to 168 (31–2). In 1977, MGR became Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu and Telugu productions had touched a new record level in that year. NTR died in early 1996, which was also the worst year in Chiranjeevi's film career. According to Andhra Pradesh Film Chamber of Commerce (1981: 131), there were 1904 cinemas in Andhra Pradesh in 1980. *A.P. Film Diary 1995* lists a total of 3080 cinemas. They declined to 2763 in 2000 according to *Screen Weekly* (4 August 2000).
6. Claims about Chiranjeevi's status as a completely self-made man, unlike Balakrishna who was promoted by his father in the early stages of his career, need to be moderated by the fact that in 1980, the former married the daughter of the highly respected actor-producer Allu Ramalingaiah. Geetha Arts, the production company established by Allu senior and subsequently run by his son, Aravind, starting in 1982, made more films with the star than any other production company (Kumar 2004: 165).
7. Chiranjeevi used these terms to describe some of his early work, including *Pranam Khareedu*. Interview, Madras, 22 January 1995.
8. The genre drew the strong condemnation of radical left publications with Naxalite sympathies. See for example, the essay on Madala Ranga Rao, the star of the early 1980s red film, by Jinka (1982).

9. See Mohanty (1977), Ray (1988), Banerjee (1980), and Das Gupta (1975) for detailed analyses of the Naxalite movement. See Balagopal (1988) for a discussion on the impact and achievements of the movement in Andhra Pradesh.
10. The Land Reforms Bill was passed in 1972 and came into force in 1973. A number of studies on the implementation of land reforms in the state have drawn attention to its failure. C. Francis (1992), citing the Task Force appointed by the Planning Commission of India, lists the following reason for the failure: lack of political will by the government, legal hurdles (which resulted in litigations holding up the distribution of over two lakh acres), and absence of correct land records. He adds that the administrators and politicians, were influenced by and sympathetic to landlords.
11. See Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (1996) for the full text of the early reports of the organization.
12. See Sumanta Banerjee (1985) for an analysis of the anti-feudal poetry and songs by poets sympathetic to the Naxalite movement.
13. In *Bobbili Puli* (Dasari Narayana Rao 1982), NTR plays the role of Chakradhar, an army major turned rebel. His father Satyam/Sankaraiah (Satyanarayana) is an army deserter turned fake sadhu. Satyam, in addition to being a criminal, also kills his wife. Chakradhar, now known as Bobbili Puli, the Tiger of Bobbili, surrenders to the police after killing his father.
14. *Pedaradyudu* revolves around the relationship between the hereditary village headman Pedarayudu (Mohan Babu), who is also the sole judicial authority of the village community, and his younger brother Raja (also played by Mohan Babu). Pedarayudu's family is involved in a feud with the villains, who are descendents of the local zamindar (Chalapathi Rao). When Raia is falsely accused of murdering the local school teacher, Pedarayudu, misled by the villains, excommunicates Raja and his pregnant wife. With the brothers separated, the villains intensify their attacks on Pedarayudu's family. Finally, the brothers are reconciled and the villains defeated. However, Pedarayudu realizes that he made a wrong judgement in his brother's case and dies. His wife collapses at his feet and dies. The film ends with Raja becoming the headman.
15. Venugopal's Interview, 1 May 1997. Chiranjeevi's popular 'biographies' by Ambadipudi (nd) and Kasivisweswara Rao (1994), too, underscore the star's humble origins.
16. Prasad (1998: 188–216), in his discussion of the representation of the feudal in New Indian Cinema, draws attention to the fascination these films had for the feudal order. He identifies as a common feature 'the use of sexuality as a site of exploration of the fascinations of feudal power' (194).
17. Yandamuri presented himself as a trendsetter in a popular cultural domain that was marked by the presence of women, writing in weeklies whose readers were presumed to be overwhelmingly female. Drawing on American

and British popular fiction, Yandamuri introduced a range of themes and genres hitherto relegated to the Telugu 'detective novel'. *Detective navala*, as it is called in Telugu, is a broad category of popular literature in Telugu, which includes writings that might otherwise be classified either as crime fiction, spy thrillers, ghost stories, science -fiction, pornography, or martial arts novels.

18. *Khaidi No.786* (1988), for instance, shows a bad landlord figure who actually acquires his wealth by killing the hero's father. The hero, himself, makes no claim to the wealth, although he knows about his father's murder. Instead, he is quite contented being a music teacher. He becomes a convict when falsely accused of murder, and at this point, he declares war on the villain.
19. Vijayashanti's work has been discussed by Lalitha Gopalan (2003) and Tejaswini Niranjana (2004). These writings are the closest that film scholarship in English has come to the discussion of the Telugu mass film. Niranjana coins the phrase, 'female vigilante film' to describe the 1990s films of Vijayashanti. I will suggest, in passing, that the female vigilante film is the mass film with a female hero. Of significance for our purposes is that in these films, the techniques that were developed from the 1980s to represent the male star, are deployed to represent the female star, who also plays roles that are similar to those of her male counterparts.
20. It can be understood as an 'item' which, in the Bombay film industry terms, is a filmic component that exists for its own sake and does not necessarily contribute to the development of the plot.
21. Naming the character after the star also happens in films made by other industries. Jackie Chan's characters of his Hong Kong productions, for example, have been named Jackie repeatedly.
22. Although I am referring to the Telugu film, coincidentally Bruce Lee's *Big Boss* (Lo Wei 1971), too, has an interesting moment of irrationality when the hero is released from a vow not to fight.
23. *Amar Akbar Anthony* (Manmohan Desai 1977) and *Satte Pe Satta* (Raj N. Sippy 1981), which offer examples of moments of irrationality in the 1970s, surpass the degree of dramatization achieved by contemporaneous Telugu films, regardless of genre. In *Amar Akbar Anthony*, a bhajan revives the mother's sight, while in the latter, the chant of the brothers inspires the Bachchan character, an impostor who has had a change of heart, to rise from the ground and defeat the villains.
24. Naxalite film, also known as the red film (*erra cinema*), is a low budget genre that features Naxalites as protagonists. Armed squads of Naxalites are often seen performing vigilante actions against landlords, corrupt police officials, or politicians and indulging in a variety of populist actions. The genre is traceable to the red films of the early 1980s, which were often made by communist sympathizers. Naxalite film acquired a sizable market in the Telangana region in the mid- to late 1990s, even as some

films went on to become major hits during their period. I will discuss this genre briefly in Chapter 5.

25. In the 'female vigilante film' featuring Vijayashanti, we notice similar signs of the disintegration of the familial and the social. The female vigilante is, at once, a part of the problem and its solution.
26. Six to be precise: the female villain, the hero's mother and sister, Durga, Roja, and her grandmother (Nirmala).
27. Interestingly, in the mid-1990s, Chiranjeevi returned to the NTR model in *Rickshawvodu* (Kodi Ramakrishna 1995) to play the double role of father and son, a zamindar and a rickshaw driver, respectively. This was a part of a wider regional tendency, shared by all south Indian industries, to invest in the bygone feudal order as an object of nostalgia. The best example of this tendency in the mass film is *Pedarayudu* (Ravi Raja Pinisetty 1995), featuring Mohan Babu in a double role. For details about NTR's contribution to this moment, see Srinvas (2006b).
28. To put it somewhat provocatively, Bachchan has not yet graduated from being a patch of glamour in the election platform to a significant player in any political formation, be it as a Congressman in the 1980s or a supporter of the Samajwadi Party in the recent past. There are dozens of other stars across the country who had similar, if not better, careers as politicians and decision makers in parties/governments. These include Rajesh Khanna and Vinod Khanna, who had strikingly different star-images from Bachchan.
29. There is a biographical reference here that Kumar's biography alerts us to. Kumar notes that Chiranjeevi is, in fact, an Ayyappa devotee and has undertaken the deeksha almost every year since his Madras days (2004: 237).
30. Press reports attribute the suicide to financial difficulties and mention that, in his suicide note, the fan expressed his regret that he would not be around to see Chiranjeevi come to power. Chiranjeevi responded immediately after the event by providing financial support to the family. For a detailed report on the suicide note and the reactions of the surviving family members of the author of the suicide note, see Online (2008d: 11).

3. Rowdy-Citizen: He who knows his *Ganji* and *Benji*

1. There is a broad-based consensus today among both academic and non-academic commentators on the increasing depth of India's democracy. To cite just one example, in the chapter on 'The Deepening of our Democracy',[1] Nandan Nilekani, co-chairman of Infosys Technologies Limited, notes with optimism,

> As a country, we are still struggling towards our democratic ideals. But these past two decades have been a time of immense hope. The move to bottom-up democracy has brought with it a far more topsy-turvy politics than we have been used to. But the clamour has come with

more access than ever before, and carries with it immense potential for change, new answers and better policy (2008: 175).

2. See for example, Benedict (2008). This report also states that Chiranjeevi's followers were organizing a 'backward caste *garjana*' to 'lure backward castes from TDP and Congress'.
3. Notice, for example, this entry in the blog of one naren1978 (naren1978.sulekha.com), which I reproduce in the original with only a few spelling changes: 'I am observing that all media want to show just Chiranjeevi garu belongs to Kapu caste this is not good. He is "ANDARIVADU". YES definitely he is good person and he is only the person to change this dirty politics caste based politics. We believe in that he will definitely do very much better than these governments. Please all support HIM to change OUR lives.' (http://naren1978.sulekha.com/blog/post/2007/12/political-collusion-of-eenadu-newspaper-with-kammas.htm, retrieved on 20 May 2008). On a less ecstatic note, an op-ed contribution in the newspaper *Andhra Jyothi*, asks precisely the question of how Chiranjeevi might emerge as 'andarivadu' (Murthy 2008: 4).
4. While I reconstruct the sequence from the live telecast of the meeting on Maa TV, this line was also widely reported in the press. For reports of the meeting, including a list of other quotable quotes from the meeting, see *Andhra Jyothi*, 27 August 2008: 1.
5. Dhareshwar and Srivatsan (1996) point out that technically speaking the rowdy is an urban petty criminal. In popular usage, the rowdy is anyone from petty criminal to a leader of a criminal gang.
6. For an analysis of the tapori of Bombay cinema, see Ranjani Mazumdar (2007: 41–78).
7. Parodying the 1970s and 1980s 'ladies' film', which usually featured Sobhan Babu in a romantic relationship with two heroines, one of whom sacrificed her love, *Yamudiki Mogudu* has the two heroines singing a song from an old Telugu film where both offer to sacrifice their love.
8. *Gharana Mogudu* was in turn remade as *Ladla* (Raj Kanwar 1994) featuring Anil Kapoor and Sridevi.
9. Ashish Rajadhyaksha alerted me to the close story-level similarities between this film and the Bengali/Hindi film *Didi/President* (Nitin Bose 1937, featuring K.L. Saigal). Rajadhyaksha and Willemen's entry on the 1930s film argues, 'The unmistakable thrust of the story is that the 'personal' (that is relations with women) should not be allowed to interfere with male pursuits like business or management, equated with social good' (1999: 271). I have not watched *Didi/President* but will add that a more immediate source for the film's story is *Seeta Ramulu* (Dasari Narayana Rao 1980), revolving around the male worker-female boss couple.
10. See for example, *Saprabhatam* (1993), which claims that the rumours about his immanent entry into politics were being fuelled by the absence of an unambiguous denial from Chiranjeevi's side.

11. The film is set in Vijayawada and the name Sundaraiah is an obvious reference to the famous Communist Party of India (Marxist) leader, Puchalapalli Sundaraiah, who spent his later years in the city and, to this day, remains one of its most important political icons.
12. The film contains references to the actions of Lalu Prasad Yadav. Bose, as minister, speaks in a rustic 'non-standard' Telugu and constantly shocks the bureaucracy and his ministerial colleagues with his unsophisticated ways. The milking of the cow is a reference to the much publicized photographs of Yadav tending his cattle even after as he became Chief Minister of Bihar.
13. On 6 August 1991, a well-planned attack was launched by upper caste Reddys on the Dalits of Chunduru village. As a result, thirteen Dalit men died. See Balagopal (1991), K. Murali (1995), and Samata Sanghatana (1991) for details of the incident. The incident implicated the cinema rather directly because, as Samata Sanghatana reports, the immediate cause was an altercation between upper caste and Dalit men at the local cinema hall, caused by the alleged misbehaviour of a Dalit youth with an upper caste woman. In a personal communication with Mr Chandrasekhar Rao, the special prosecutor in the Chunduru case, I came to know that the film in question was not, after all, a mass film but *Gharshana*, the Telugu dubbed version of *Agni Nakshatram* (Tamil, Mani Rathnam 1988).

4. Fans, Families, and Phantoms: *Alluda Majaka* Revisited

1. According to a pamphlet issued by Asleelata Pratighatana Vedika (1995), 37 cuts were withdrawn subsequently.
2. See also the coverage by *India Today* (Telugu), 6–20 May 1995.
3. 'Fans, Families and Censorship: The *Alluda Majaka* Controversy', in Srinivas (1997), published with modifications as Srinivas (1999).
4. See, for example, Shohini Ghosh (1999 and 2004), M. Madhava Prasad (2004), and Lawrence Liang et al. (2007).
5. For a discussion of the issues thrown up by *Fire* for feminists, see Carol Upadhya (1998), and Mary John and Tejaswini Niranjana (1999).
6. Reported in *Cine On Herald* (1978). The forum in question was being established in Nellore and its first campaign was to be against obscene films and posters. Its members belonged to 'progressive' (*abhyudaya*, read parliamentary left) and 'radical' (read Naxalite) organizations and the local rationalist association. The announcement of this campaign against obscene films and posters was in the year when Chiranjeevi entered the film industry.
7. Culled from the back volumes of *Naitika Viplavam* and the organization's pamphlets.

8. A brutally short summary version of the degeneration narrative, compiled from the contributors to Sastry (1986), would run as follows: 'If the decade of the fifties can be called the golden era of Telugu cinema, it was in the latter half of the sixties that the decline (quality wise) began' (Eshwar 1986: 77). This was the period of crime films inspired by the Telugu James Bond series and other formula films. They 'heralded the advent of cabaret dances in Telugu films' (Kannala 1986: 29). In addition, the obscene comedy track and the vamp are contributions of this moment. As a result, 'The sixties saw very few meaningful films being produced, even as commercial successes were completely blotting realism' (Kannala 1986: 29).
9. This point has been made by Shohini Ghosh (1999) in her examination of 1990s anti-obscenity campaigns. She notes, 'The unsettling congruence of discourses between feminists and the religious right took its most dangerous twist over the Miss World 1996 beauty pageant in Bangalore' (p. 246). Ghosh goes on to list the constituents of The Federation of Opponents to the Miss World Contest. The major players of this platform were: Nanjundaswami, president of the Karnataka State Farmers' Association, Shashikala of the Mahila Jagaran Manch, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), student wing of the BJP, and the Students' Islamic Organization (SIO), student wing of the Jamaat-e-Islami and said to be the fourth-largest Muslim organization in India (p. 247). Women's groups who protested against the pageant included the local feminist organization Vimochana, the women's wings of Socialist Unity Centre of India and Communist Party of India (Marxist) but also 'an assortment of autonomous groups' (p. 248).
10. All statements of Sandhya quoted in this chapter are based on a personal interview at Hyderabad on 5 October 1996.
11. Vijayalakshmi's statements quoted in this chapter are based on an interview at Hyderabad on 1 December 1996.
12. A combination of factors was responsible for the spurt in sex films. The survival of a hugely expanded exhibition sector, which could not afford the spiralling costs of hiring new Telugu films, depended on the availability of cheap films. A vast distribution network catering to this segment of the exhibition sector began to source cheap films that were either dubbed from other languages or imported. A significant proportion of such films were 'sex films', which were either Indian or imported soft-porn films, art films with sexually explicit sequences, or otherwise innocuous films with explicit sequences interpolated later. Almost always, the explicit sequence is added post censorship or reinserted in spite of cuts. For a discussion of the lower rungs of the film industry in Andhra Pradesh, see Srinivas (2003). For an artistic exploration of the spaces and spectatorship of the sex film in the Indian context, see Kunal Sen (2003).
13. I have not been able to access this crucial review in spite of knowing that *Sitara* is the only Telugu film magazine that has been systematically

archived. Back volumes of the magazine are available at the *Eenadu* newspaper's library and are inaccessible to the general public at present.

14. Srihari's statements quoted in this chapter are based on a personal interview at Hyderabad on 24 November 1996.
15. For an informative discussion of some key works on the masquerade, see Lalitha Gopalan, pp. 54–5.
16. Chakravarty argues,

    > [T]he Bombay film's use of the masquerade is motivated ... by ideas of fragmentation and disintegration of the social/national body and its recuperation and regeneration. It serves as a crossover phenomenon: between the individual and the social, between one's current state and a future state, between the private citizen and the public official, between dis-ease and well-being. As utopian moments interspersed in filmic texts, the masquerade signifies the triumph of social ideals within the context of the modern nation-state (1993: 311–12).

17. See, Kuhn (1988), Hansen (1991), and Pandian (1996) for a discussion on elite responses to British, Hollywood and Tamil cinema, respectively. The authors focus on particular historical and cultural contexts and can be seen as situating what Vasudevan calls cinephobia within socially and culturally specific contests over the public domain.
18. For example, a *Tara Sitara* report states that in anticipation of Chiranjeevi's political entry, established political heavyweights (read members of the TDP, which was in power then) were plotting to implicate him in false cases to cause embarrassment (*Tara Sitara* 2002: 11). The attitude of this magazine underwent a change in the later years after Chiranjeevi's relatives and fans attacked journalists in unrelated incidents. In 2003, Pawan Kalyan allegedly manhandled reporters who gate crashed into a family function, while, in 2004, the film magazine *Number 1* shut down after its editor was allegedly assaulted by Chiranjeevi fans for negative reports on the star in the magazine. In a move that was virtually unthinkable some years earlier, *Tara Sitara* lumped Chiranjeevi with five other stars, including Pawan Kalyan, in a wide-ranging condemnation of their irresponsible behaviour. The article noted that Chiranjeevi's image had taken a beating in the recent past (*Tara Sitara* 2003: 6).
19. Akhilandhra Chiranjeevi Yuvatha 1995, 'Press Note' issued on the occasion of the rally in defence of the film on the following day in Hyderabad by fans in defence of the film.

5. Remaking the Star to Make a Politician

1. Rajadhyaksha and Willemen (1999) provide different production figures for the two years (twelve and fourteen, respectively).

2. In this mode of distribution, distributors advance money for production and retain the amount of investment when the film begins its run. It is only after they recover their advance, that both distributor and producer begin to share the revenue, often on an equal basis.
3. Dutt is referring to the tendency of producers to transfer the entire cost of publicity and promotion to the distributors. The latter had to pay separately for it under the 'print and publicity cost' category.
4. Madhava Prasad (1998: 117–137) makes an interesting argument about the attempts made by the Hindi film industry to prevent what he calls the disaggregation of the film market. There are some parallels between Hindi and Telugu industries, with the mass film being an important example of how the industry tried to defer the 'moment of disaggregation' (Prasad's phrase) after NTR's entry into politics.
5. In the 1990s, 'youth', began to be seen as a large enough market segment to return large profits. The discovery of new cash cows is not of immediate relevance to our discussion. According to the film industry, the category of 'youth' comprises of urban high school and college going students. The success of *Geetanjali* (Mani Rathnam 1989) was in part responsible for the increased prominence of the youth as a market segment, that was presumed to comprise of better paying customers as well. Till this point of time, the youth film was largely a low-budget romance featuring minor stars or new actors. In spite of the success of a number of youth films throughout the 1980s, there never was an attempt to scale it up.
6. Recent examples include *Ganga* (Sekhar Yalamanchi 2006) and *Bathukamma* (T. Prabhakar 2008). Both films are set in Telangana and *Ganga* was not even released in coastal Andhra.
7. Vijayashanti quickly made a crossover to politics, joining the BJP only to abandon it later. She then traced her origins to Telangana and declared that she would work for the formation of a separate Telangana state. In 2007, she formed the Talli Telangana Party. In 2009, she joined the Telangana Rashtra Samiti.
8. Rentala (2005: 35) reports that around 450 cinema halls were closed between 1995 and 2005 in Andhra Pradesh. In 2005, there was only one multiplex in the state.
9. In the course of a casual conversation, I asked film director K. Balaji why films were advertised in Gemini Television long after their first run was over. He informed me about the cashless arrangement between the channel and film producers, and the resulting after-life of many a flop film as a Gemini TV advertisement.
10. Interview, Hyderabad, 30 January 2008. The official wishes to remain anonymous.
11. The industry makes a distinction between 'direct' and 'dubbed' films but treats both as Telugu films. Direct films are films scripted and produced in Telugu. Dubbed films are dubbed from other languages into Telugu.

Till the mid-1990s, dubbing was more or less confined to films produced in other south Indian languages, but from the late 1990s, imported films too began to be dubbed into Telugu.

12. Nativity is an important concept for the Tamil industry as well. See also Kaali (2000) for the discussion of a Tamil film genre associated with nativity.
13. Critics' reaction to the film was, by and large, positive, but Kannala calls *Sankarabharanam*, a 'pseudo-musical … couched in melodramatic mélange [sic]'. He, nevertheless, concedes, 'the film offered some good music and tried to focus attention towards aesthetics [sic]' (1986: 35). Some others described it as a 'trend-setter' [Eshwar (1986) and Aditya (1986)]. The film's greatest achievement, according to one critic, was that it was 'able to create genuine interest in classical music even among the unlettered villagers of Andhra' (Eshwar 1986: 77).
14. M. Murali, Hyderabad, 9 August 1995. This is a part of Sivaji's collection of unusual letters made available to the author by Chiranjeevi's office in Hyderabad.
15. To cite just one instance of how Vishwanath would be cast, in the Balakrishna super hit *Narasimha Naidu* (B. Gopal 2001), he plays a father who trains his son in traditional arts of warfare to take on the villains.
16. In retrospect, the star attributed the poor performance of his films to his foray into Hindi productions. That move apparently prevented him from concentrating on his Telugu films (Rammohan Rao 2003: 12).
17. In the mid-1990s, there was spate of films modelled on *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (Sooraj Barjatya 1994) and targeting family audiences. *Ninne Pelladuta* was one such, as was the highly successful low-budget film featuring the less known Srikanth in the lead, *Pelli Sandadi* (Raghavendra Rao 1997). This film was produced by a syndicate comprising of Allu Aravind, Aswini Dutt, and Raghavendra Rao, all three of whom were closely associated with Chiranjeevi (the first two as producers and the last as director).
18. The film's publicity material depicts the hero's house as a fort, complete with stone walls etc. The fort was also used as a stage backdrop for the 100th day celebration of the film in Ongole on 1 May 1997 (Fig. 42).
19. For an interesting discussion of the comedy track in Tamil cinema, with specific references to the spoofing of melodramatic conventions see Srinivas and Kaali (1999: 208–27).
20. Prasad argues, 'The sister, in these films, is a *cause* that the hero takes up and through which he elevates himself from a state of immanence in the diegesis, rising above it as a transcendental signifier. Sister-love is an ingenious solution for the problem of narrative authority that the popular cinema faces' (1999: 45).
21. See Prasad (1999) for a discussion of the off-screen images of the first generation south Indian stars (MGR, NTR, and Rajkumar). Srikanth

Kumar makes a reference to Chiranjeevi's association with Tata Indicom (2004: 139).

22. See also Shanti Kumar (2006) for a discussion of Ramoji Film City and its facilities and economics.
23. The control of cinema halls through lease agreements by distribution and production companies is facing strong opposition from independent producers and the trade bodies of the film industry. By 2008, companies owned by Ramanaidu and Allu Aravind (Chiranjeevi's brother-in-law), along with public limited entertainment companies like Adlabs and Pyramid Saimira, as well some other local players, had reportedly acquired the control of 'several hundred theatres in the state and [were] almost dictating the trade'. Typically, they charged rents that were over 200 per cent of the lease amounts paid to the original owners, increasing the exhibition costs to about 10 lakh rupees per month per theatre. This made a dent in the profit margins of distributors and producers (*Times News Network* 2008: 3).
24. One of the highlights of this film is a bungee jump performed by the star. Shot in slow motion, this action serves as the prelude to the film, which is usually reserved for introducing the star protagonist. The sequence is also repeated at the end of the film.
25. This film was remade as *Calcutta Mail* (Sudhir Mishra 2003) in Hindi.
26. For a run-up of events leading to the bomb blast see Nagesh Kumar (1997: 10).
27. K. Balagopal (2004) responded to the election of Y.S. Rajasekhar Reddy as the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh with an essay on factionism in Rayalaseema, which he argued brought Reddy to power. Balagopal's description of the faction helps us understand why the region may have been so attractive to the film industry as a setting for the new mass film:

    > The typical village faction was that of the village headman, called reddy in Rayalaseema. That appellation today refers to a dominant caste which is present all over the state, and men of the caste tag on reddy behind their names. But that is a phenomenon of recent decades, more particularly the latter three-quarters of the 20th century. The word has a complex history, one moment of which is that it designated the village headman in the Rayalaseema districts, in the days when village administration was presided over by the institution of hereditary headmen. This reddy would protect his primacy in the affairs of the village with the most aggressive zealousness. Any challenger to his importance would have to contend with a violent response from him. Though we spoke above of a retinue maintained by such strongmen, it was not a permanent gang maintained only for fighting. Most of the retinue would be ordinary farmers or labourers who come to the aid of the [r]eddy when called upon to do so. They would, it goes without saying, benefit in matters where the reddy had the final say, but passionate loyalty of the reddy's

followers is a characteristic of village factions. Their attachment was never merely a matter of rational calculation (2004: 2426).

28. As Balagopal (2004) points out, the contemporary off-screen factionist cannot be claimed to have feudal origins. Most prominent factionists of today in fact had humble origins. But then, so did Chiranjeevi.
29. Readers familiar with Tamil cinema will notice the extent to which the faction film is indebted to the Rajnikant starrer *Basha* (1994) in terms of the movement between time and place. In the Tamil film, Rajnikant is a former Bombay don who now passes off as an autorickshaw driver.
30. See, for example, the report on the shooting of crowd sequences of *Samarasimha Reddy* in *Sivaranjani*, 26 November 1998: 9.
31. The reference to Sri Sri here, mediated by a sequence in *Rudraveena*, where Suryam's successful efforts at educating the masses are presented in terms of processions of people with the same song playing in the background (but set to a different tune). A modified version of the poem was also used as the soundtrack for Chiranjeevi's campaign video, released on 26 August 2008 during the launch of the Praja Rajyam Party.
32. Pawan Kalyan is reported to have told a gathering of fans that the star was considering an entry into politics, 'for the past four years', that is from 2004 (Online 2008c: 9). Chiranjeevi has never denied the possibility of his entry into politics even in his interviews with me as early as 1995. He has repeatedly stated that he would take the decision (to enter politics) at the appropriate time.
33. Children with disabilities also served as the backdrop to his last public appearance (15 August 2008) before the star went on to formally announce the decision to enter politics (17 August 2008).
34. Stalin's scheme, like the pyramid scheme, is founded on the promise of arithmetic progression in the number of participants at each level (in the film, this is in multiples of three). For an account of pyramid schemes in Andhra Pradesh and their popularity, see S. Ananth (2007: 471–83).
35. *Pay it Forward* (Mimi Leder 2000).
36. This is the approximate population of Andhra Pradesh. Ever since NTR's first election campaign in 1982–3, the size of the state's population has been referred to in political discourse and films, alike. *Mutha Mestri*, I pointed out in an earlier chapter, refers to seven crore Telugus.
37. See for example, Online (2008c: 9) in which Pawan Kalyan made this distinction. During the launch of the Praja Rajyam Party, and afterwards Chiranjeevi repeatedly stated that he was a servant of the people.

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Index

Aata 248n8
Aaj Ka Goondaraj 64
Aapadbandhavudu 38, 65, 204–6, 209
Abhilasha 82, 89
Adavi Ramudu 78
Aditya 265n13
Aditya 386 94
Aggiramudu 101
Agni Nakshatram 261n13
Ali 98, 109, 113, 201
Alluda Majaka xxix, 32, 34, 67, 98, 100, 102, 108, 142, 157–88
Amar Akbar Anthony 258n23
Ambadipudi 257n15
Ambedkar, B.R. xv, 15, 18, 19, 249n17
Amin, Shahid 57
Ammoru 104, 201
Ananda Bhairavi 203, 204
Ananth, S. 21, 267n34
Andala Ramudu 203, 204
Agarwal, Arti 226
Andarivadu 126, 141, 142, 152, 214
  Andarivadu, everybody's man figure 141, 172, 260n3
Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee (APCLC) 84, 257n11
Andhra Pradesh Film Development Corporation (APFDC) xxxi
Andhra Pradesh Film Fans Association (APFFA) 7
Anji 228
Ankur 83
Annayya 214, 217
Anti-Mandal agitation 15–16, 132, 152
anti-obscenity campaign xxix, 157–73, 184, 200, 262n9
Anti-Obscenity Forum *see* Asleelata Pratighatana Vedika
Aradhana 65
Aravind, Allu 9, 58, 59, 61, 248n7, 254n53, 254,n55, 256n6, 265n17, 266n23
Arjun, Allu 10, 19, 217
Asleelata Pratighatana Vedika (Anti-Obscenity Forum) 158, 164, 166, 261n1
Aswini Dutt, Ch. 23, 57, 195, 265n17
Attaku Yamudu Ammayiki Mogudu 93, 102, 174, 179
audience xxvii, 29, 35, 55, 76–7, 98, 107, 137, 197, 200, 228
  (middle) class xxv, 65, 75, 171, 202

credulousness of 161, 163, 165, 182, 185, 208
diegetic 120–1, 124, 227, 231, 238
family/female 189, 214
history of film 8, 37, 40–5
mass/lower class 65–6, 109, 169–74
socially mixed 170, 185
as distinct from spectator 4–5, 104, 126

Bachchan, Amitabh 65, 78, 87, 120–1, 137, 142, 253n50, 256n3, 258n23, 259n28
Back to the Future 94
Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) 141
Balagopal, K. 15, 249n13, 257n9, 261n13, 266n27, 267n28
Balaji, K. 251n35, 264n9
Balakrishna, Nandamuri 82, 86
and Chiranjeevi xxix, 10, 74, 81, 94, 190, 192, 193, 199, 210, 211, 218, 238, 255n60, 256n6
in the faction film 223, 227, 265n15
fans 12, 17, 21–2, 27, 32, 36, 58, 98, 250n28, 251n38, 252n45, 255n60
Balaraju 252n42
Balaramaiah, G. 252n42
Balibar, Etienne 131–4
Banerjee, Sumanta 84, 257n12
Bangaru Bullodu 251n38
Bapineedu, Vijay 55, 59, 109
Bapu, K. 202–3, 210
Basha 201, 267n29
Baskaran, S. Theodore 4, 7, 249n25, 252n40
Bathukamma 264n6
Bavagaru Bagunnara 220–1, 223
Bendre, Sonali 225
Benegal, Shyam 83
Bhadrachalam 104, 105
Bhairava Dweepam 94
Bhanjupriya 146
Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) 19, 157, 164, 186, 262n9, 264n7
Bharatiya Janata Mahila Morcha (BJMM) 167
Bhojpuri cinema xxv
Big Boss (Lo Wei 1971) 258n22
Big Boss (Vijay Bapineedu 1995) 32, 98, 104, 105, 108–27, 210, 235
biographical reference
in the mass film 97–102, 118, 143, 144, 151, 180
blockage xxvi, xxviii, 3, 73, 190–3, 214–18, 236, 239
Bobbili Brahmanna 85
Bobbili Puli 257n13
Bobby 38
Bollywood(ization) xv–xvii, xxii, 107, 127, 190, 229
Bordwell, David 4–5, 135
Brahmanandam 154, 176
Brahmin
filmic representation of 134–5, 139, 206
Bowser, Eileen 41–2
buyer system (*see also* film distribution) 195–6, 205
and minimum guarantee 195

Calcutta Mail 266n25
censorship 164, 168, 173, 177
Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) 157–8
and fear/prohibition of mimesis 161, 178–82
Chakrapani 151–2
Chakravarty, Sumita 180, 263n16
Challenge 89–91
Chan, Jackie xxx, 258n21
Chanakya, Tapi 145

Chandramohan 87
Charan Raj 205
Chattaniki Kallu Levu 87, 88
Chatterjee, Partha 132–4
Cheemala Dandu 201
Chinna 174
Chiranjeevi (Konidela Shivashankar Varaprasad) 13, 22, 24, 34, 49, 52, 61, 63, 67, 68, 96, 113–14, 124–7, 142, 151, 174, 175, 176, 177, 181, 182, 210, 211, 231, 234, 235, 236, 237
and brand endorsement 218, 266n21
fans xv, 3–69, 108–10, 117, 158–9, 164, 167, 170, 183–8, 207–8, 230
and the Telugu film industry xxx–xxxii, 94, 106, 195, 199, 201, 209–10, 239
image problems of 190, 192, 197, 214
phases of film career xxxi, 74, 81–6, 97, 189–93, 203–6, 215–18, 228, 229
politics xxiii, xxiv, xxv, 21, 79, 107, 121, 129, 140–1, 149, 152–6, 214, 224–5, 227, 231–2, 236–7, 238, 240
Chiranjeevi 65
Chitram 218, 219
Chirtam Bhalare Vichitram 179
Choodalani Vundi 195, 217, 222–3
Chua, Beng Huat 6
Chunduru 154, 262n13
cinema halls xxi, xxiv, xxvi, 8, 38, 73, 79–80, 119, 168, 170, 173, 183, 185, 188, 189, 194, 199–201, 205, 219, 220, 228, 240, 251n39, 264n8, 266n23
as democratic/segregated spaces 39–45
fan activity at 10–14, 30–2, 34, 36, 46, 49, 51, 103, 248n8
and violence 55–6, 167, 184, 252n42, 253n45, 261n13
cinematic populism xxv, xxix, 73–128, 129, 211, 232, 239
cinephilia 103, 160, 240
and cinephobia 185, 263n17
fan activity as 27–30, 45, 50, 73
and reading of films 33, 102
citizen-subject 131–4
citizenship xxix, 130, 145, 146, 147
super-citizen 144, 238
woman-subject 132, 166
class film 201–9
comedy track 33, 96, 197
and obscenity 262n8
and parody of main narrative 216
in Tamil cinema 265n19
commodity 44, 136
Commission on Educational and Cultural Films 162
Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) [CPI (ML)] *see* Naxalite
conditional loyalty xxviii, 24–7, 110
Congress (Indian National Congress, Congress [I]) xvii, 16–24, 55, 57, 80, 84, 140, 223, 249n20, 259n28, 260n2
consumer rights 43
credit sequences 95–6, 100
credulous/credulousness person 163, 182
influence of cinema and 158, 161, 237
motivated 238
and obscenity 169, 173
and resistance to narrative possibilities 63–4
cross-dressing
in films 176, 179, 181, 216
culture industry xxvi, 103

Daddy 214, 217
Dalit 55, 141, 152, 154–5, 206, 239, 261n13

fans of Chiranjeevi 18–19
in *Malapilla* 134–40
movement in Andhra Pradesh xx, 15
Damini 226
Das, Veena xxii
Das Gupta, Biplab 257n9
Das Gupta, Chidananda xx, 4, 129, 215
democracy
India's deepening 140, 259n1
detective navala (detective novel) 258n17
Deva, Prabhu 249n24
Dharam Adhikari 85
Dhareshwar, Vivek and R. Srivatsan 133, 138–9, 143, 147, 260n5
Dickey, Sara xxi, 3, 4, 26, 27, 31, 35, 46, 250n30, 252n44
Didi/President 260n9
disavowal 56, 207, 211, 214
and doubling 148–52
and obscenity 164, 176, 178, 179, 184, 188
'Disco' Shanti 142, 149
disincorporation 138, 139
Doane, Mary Ann 180
Don (Chandra Barot 1978) 256n3
Don (Farhan Akhtar 2006) 7
Donga Mogudu 142, 145–7, 181
Doss, K.S.R. 256n3
Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) xx, 8
Dywer, Rachel xxii
Dyer, Richard 62, 101, 135–8, 144

Eenadu 263n13
group of media companies 186, 200, 219
elections xv, xvi, xviii, xx, xxi, xxiv, xxv, 15, 16, 17, 18, 21, 23, 27, 29, 31, 57, 69, 74, 78, 80, 82, 83, 106, 121, 140, 152, 153, 158, 189, 215, 237, 249n20, 253n50, 255n61, 259n28, 266n27, 267n36
Ellis, John 136–7
Elsaesser, Thomas 43–4
Enga Veetu Pillai 145
entertainment tax *see* slab system
enthusiasm 30–1, 107
entitlement xxviii, 36–45, 53, 56, 64, 104, 105, 110, 239
Erra Sainyam 198
Eshwar, B.K. 262n8, 265n13
Evans Report on India Cinema 162–3
excess
enjoyment of the cinema 4, 12, 27, 29, 45–6, 54–6, 66, 69, 73, 125, 160, 173, 187
enjoyment and screen rowdy figures of 147–55, 181, 213–15

faction film 223–8, 233
Fair Film Fans' Association (FFFA) 164, 169
fans xvii, xxiii, xxiv, xxv, xvi, xxvii, xix, xxix, xxx, 3–6, 10, 11, 13, 28–30, 57, 74, 75, 94, 98, 104, 107, 108, 109, 110, 117, 125, 127, 130, 141, 192, 204, 207, 208–9, 210, 211, 214, 230, 231, 236, 238, 248n5, 249n24
and *Alluda Majaka* controversy xxix, 158–9, 160, 164, 165, 167, 170, 171, 183, 185–8
associations in other states xx–xxi, 7–8, 247n1, 254n54
and caste 15, 18–20
cine fan 7
discussion of films by 31–3
early associations of NTR 9
and politics xxviii, 16–17, 21–5, 55–6, 58, 259n30, 267n32
productions by 47, 48–9, 52
rigging of box office collections xxvii, 9, 39

of Rajkumar 14, 53–4
and reformist initiatives by star 58–67
and social service 50, 67–8
theatre-centred activities 34–40, 45, 46, 51, 103
violence by 39, 56, 247n3, 250n33, 251n38, 252n45, 253n47, 263n16
female vigilante film 179, 258n19, 259n25
feudalism
Naxalite critiques of 84
in New India Cinema 83, 87, 257n16
Telugu cinema's obsession with 83
flashback 109–11, 115, 116–19, 148, 181, 206, 213, 218, 221, 222, 224, 229
fragment 99, 102, 178
The Film in National Life 162
A Film by Arvind 191
film industry 44, 45, 137, 177
in Bombay/Mumbai xxvii, 137, 142, 190, 192, 194, 258n20
Hindi 76
in Madras xx–xxi, 194, 196, 203
Telugu xxii, xxiv, xxvii, xxviii, xxx, xxxi, 9, 38, 39, 54, 56, 61, 64, 73–86, 87, 89, 103, 106, 156, 157, 164, 170, 171, 172, 186, 188, 189–202, 203, 209–10, 216, 218, 220, 223, 228, 229, 233, 239–41
film distribution xxi, xxiii, xxiv, xxvi, 56, 79–81, 193–201, 219–20, 262n12, 264n2, 266n23
film exhibition xxi, xxiii, xxvi, 9, 79, 162, 193, 194, 199, 220, 252n41, 262n12, 264n8, 266n23
film market
fragmentation of 197–201
film production xx–xxi, xxiii, xxvi–xxvii, xxx, 197–205, 256n5, 263n1, 264n2, 266n23
NTR model of star-centred 193–6, 209–10, 219
and risk management 195
Film Studies xxii, xxiii, 4–5, 27
film vewers' associations *see prekshaka sanghalu*
Fire 160, 261n5
First Blood 89, 97
first night 151, 182
Fiske, John 46
folklore film 76, 94, 105, 145, 256n2
Francis, C. 257n10
Friedberg, Anne 161

Gaddar 199
Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand xv, 57
Gandhians 6, 134, 153, 155
Gandhi Smaraka Samiti 164
Ganesan, Gemini 206
Ganesan, Sivaji xviii, 9, 247n2
Ganga 264n6
Gangleader 64, 78, 89, 91–3, 98, 122
Geetanjali 264n5
Gemini Television 200, 264n9
genre 103–5, 256n2, 258n23, 265n12
blockage and 190–3, 196–201
class film as, *see* class film
mass film as 79, 95–5, 107, 118, 146–7,160, 170, 174, 180, 216, 218, 221–2, 227, 228, 236, 240
definitional problems 73–8
Gharana Bullodu 86, 201
Gharana Mogudu 65, 78, 86, 93, 96, 142, 149–52, 154, 155, 174, 208, 250n31, 260n8
fan objections to 63–3
Gharshana 261n13

Ghatothkachudu 201
Ghosh, Shohini 261n4, 262n9
Giribabu 175
Gopal, B. 94, 223
Gopalakrishnayya, Vavilala 6
Gopalan, Lalitha 28, 75, 102, 143–4, 176, 180, 258n19, 263n15
Gudavalli, Ramabrahmam 83, 134, 193
Guha, Ranajit 253n48
Gunasekhar 13

Habermas, Jurgen 32
Hansen, Miriam 5, 41, 136–7
Hansen, Thomas Blom 130
Hardgrave, Robert 3, 4, 8, 9, 16, 101, 129, 247n2, 253n50, 254n54
Hardgrave, Robert and Anthony Neidhart xxi, 3, 30
Harikrishna, Nandamuri 10, 22
Hero 89, 98
Hitler 36, 81, 108, 109, 141, 189, 193, 209–14, 217–18, 220
Hollywood xxiii, 7, 263n17
  borrowings from 97, 98, 145, 220, 228, 233
  genres 76, 94, 191
Hong Kong xxxii, 89, 104, 135, 191, 258n21
Hughes, Stephen Putnam 41, 161, 162
Hum Aapke Hain Koun 265n17
Hyderabad 223
  fan activity in 6, 11, 13, 25–6, 47, 158, 250n31, 263n19
  film industry in xxxi, 33, 81, 167, 194
  filmic representation of 191, 225

Iddaru Mitrulu 101, 144–5
imagi chatram (image's frame) 192, 197, 214, 238
Indian Cinematograph Act, 1918 162
Indian Motion Picture Congress 43
Indian National Congress
  see Congress
intertextuality references in films 33, 102–3, 110, 117, 238
Indra 214, 215, 223–8, 231, 237
Intlo Ramayya Veedhilo Krishnayya 82, 87, 88
Issar, Puneet 221, 225
item/item song 100, 142, 149, 214, 258n20

Jagadeka Veerudu Atiloka Sundari 94, 98
Jambalakidipamba 179
Jana Natya Mandali (JNM) 198, 199
Jandhyala 203, 205
Jayalalithaa xix
Jayasudha 87
Jebudonga 142
Jindra, Michael 46
John, Mary and Tejaswini Niranjana 261n5
Jyothilakshmi 110

Kaali, Sundar 265n12
Kalpana 111
Kalyan Ram, Nandamuri 10
Kamma caste xxiv, 17–20, 23, 26, 55, 89, 135, 186
Kanagal, Puttanna 82
Kannala 247n4, 262n8, 265n13
Kanchanamala 138–40
Kapu caste xiv, 18–20, 89, 141, 237, 249n14, 260n3
  Kapunadu 15
Karnataka xx, 10, 12, 14, 53–4, 255n61, 262n9
Keathley, Christian 27
Keelugurram 101

Khaidi xvii, xix, 17, 57, 74, 81, 82, 85, 86, 87, 88–9, 93, 96–100, 102, 106, 152, 203
Khaidi No. 786 93, 174, 258n18
Khushboo 234
Kodama Simham 88, 94, 98
Kodavatiganti, Kutumba Rao 83, 138–9
Kohli, Atul 16, 140
Kondaveeti Raja 94, 251n37
Korean cinema xxvi
Kracauer, S. 3
Krishna 186, 194, 199, 202, 250n33
  fans 9, 16, 17, 20, 35, 38, 39, 55, 75, 82, 85, 247n3, 250n32, 255n59
Krishnam Raju 85
Krishnarjuna 250n33
Kuhn, Annette 161, 263n17
Kung Fu Hustle 104
Kutumba Rao, Turlapati 7–8

Ladla 260n8
Lage Raho Munnabhai 214
Lakshmiparvathy, Nandamuri 247n2, 248n12
Lankeswarudu 60
Lee, Bruce 258n22
Lorry Driver 86
Lutgendorf, Philip xxii

Maa Television 200, 250n27, 260n4
Mad Max 82, 89
Madam 179
Madanapalle 6, 19, 252n41
Madhavi 87, 111, 146
Madhusudhan Rao, V. 191
Mahesh Babu 13, 38
Malapilla 134–5, 138–40, 143, 144
Malayalam cinema xix, xxiii, 145, 211, 147n1
Mammotty 211
Manavuri Pandavulu 82, 203
Manchupallaki 82, 203
Mangammagari Manavadu 82
Mannan 149
Manushulanta Okkate 101
Marana Mrudangam 57
masquerade 263n15, 263n16
  in the mass film179, 180–2, 211, 216, 225
  fan in 185
mass film
  ambivalence to feudal authority 82–6, 88, 91–3, 97, 111–12, 118, 142, 190, 193, 211, 214, 220–3, 259n27
  and creation of new stars 78–9
  crisis in 188, 193–201
  female figures in 102, 112, 142, 147, 174, 177, 179, 210, 216, 262n8
  as genre 74–8
  industrial context of its origin 78–81
  and New Indian Cinema 83–4
  and the play with star recognition 95–103
  rowdy figures in 93, 131–56, 173, 185, 188, 202, 210, 214–15, 217
  and spectator 94–128
  techniques (*see* biographical reference, flashback, masquerade, moment of irrationality)
  thematic concerns 81–94
Master 217, 220, 221–2, 224, 229
Mayne, Judith 5
Mechanic Alludu 32
Meenakshi Seshadri 205
Megastar Chiranjeevi 45, 55, 58–66, 69, 109, 117, 142, 207, 248n5, 253n52, 254n56, 255n60
melodrama
  as default form of popular Telugu cinema 191, 210, 210, 216, 221, 224

Metz, Christian 40
disavowal 148, 185
credulous viewer 163, 169, 254n57
Mishra, Vijay 136–7
moment of irrationality
in the mass film 104–6, 119–27, 234–5, 267
in non-Telugu films 104–5, 258n22, 258n23
Mohan Babu 68, 95–6, 186, 199, 248n9, 257n14, 259n27
Mohanty, Manoranjan 257n9
Mother Teresa xv, 19, 36, 249n17
Mrugaraju 33, 217, 228, 250n28
Mulvey, Laura 135–6, 180
Munnabhai M.B.B.S. 214, 228
Murali, K. 261n13
Murali Mohan, K. xxxi, 91
Murugadoss, A.R. 230
Musser, Charles 42
Mutha Mestri 86, 93, 98, 120, 142, 152–6, 193, 216, 237
Mutyala Muggu 203
mythological film xviii, 9, 76, 77, 94, 105, 256n2

Nadodi Mannan 145
Nagarjuna, Akkineni 86, 98, 201, 210
fans 250n33
Nagendra Babu, K. xvi, 10, 47, 68, 186, 204, 248n7
Nageswara Rao Akkineni, (ANR) xx, 9, 20, 78, 88, 101, 145, 202, 204, 218
Nagma 63, 149
Naidu, Chota K. xv
Naidu, Nara Chandrababu 21
Naidu, R. Swamy 167, 171, 173, 186, 248n5, 251n37
Nair, Janaki xxii, 14
Naitika Viplavam 164, 168, 261n7
Nandakumar, R. 86
Nandy, Ashis 41
Narasaiah, K. 76, 169, 170, 172, 173, 194, 197, 247n4, 256n2
Narasimha Naidu 223, 250n28, 265n15
Narayana Murthy, R. 198–9, 201
Narayana Rao, Dasari 84, 102, 212, 257n13, 260n9
and class film 204
and Naxalite film 198–201
narrative xix, xxvii, 27, 145, 173, 178, 185, 213, 216, 218, 221
blockage at the level of xxvi, xxviii, 58, 63, 131, 190, 209, 218
fan demands on 37–8
segmentation in the mass film 226–8
and spectacle 135–6
and spectatorial rights 40
and the star 78, 79, 85, 95–128, 155, 265n20
Narasaraju, D.V. 145
National emergency xviii, 15
Post-emergency mobilization xvii, 31, 140
nativity 203, 265n12
Naxalite film 106, 198–9, 210, 258n24
Naxalite movement xviii, 15, 16, 84–5, 256n8, 257n9, 261n6
women's groups and obscenity 164–7
Neale, Steve 77, 105
Nehru *see* Rajasekhar, Devineni
nickelodeon 41–2
Nilekani, Nandan 259n1
Ninne Pelladuta 210, 221, 265n17
Nippulanti Manishi 256n3
Niranjana, Tejaswini 132, 140, 154, 166, 180, 258n19
Nirmala 91, 98, 259n26
Nishant 83

Non-Resident Indian (NRI) 10
figure in films 174, 175, 176, 182
Number One 35

obligation
of the star 56, 124, 211, 239
obscenity
and embarrassment 169, 172, 173, 176, 183
and imperialist culture 165, 166, 168
of sequences from *Alluda Majaka* 175–9
and sexual transgression 177–82
and violence against women 166, 167
Om Shanti Om 127–8
Ongole 6, 108–9, 265n18
Ooha 174
Orey Rickshaw 199, 201
Osey Ramulamma 199

Padmalaya Studio 17
Paduvarahalli Pandavaru 82
Palletooru 83
Pandian, M.S.S. xxi, 3, 4, 46, 101, 192, 215, 252n44, 263n17
Paranji, Jayanth C. 223
Parthasarathy, D. 249n19
Pasivadi Pranam 89
Patala Bhairavi 94, 101
Pawan Kalyan, K. 10, 217, 263n18, 267n32
particularity
of the subaltern 138–9
transcendence of 135, 140–1, 152, 154
Pay it Forward 233
Pedarayudu 85, 193, 201, 216, 220, 257n14, 259n27
Pelli Sandadi 265n17
phantom viewer 161, 164, 173, 183–4
photogenie 28
Pinisetty, Ravi Raja (a.k.a. Ravi Raja) 85, 251n38
political society 132, 133–4
politics
in Andhra Pradesh xvii–xviii, 15–18, 84–5, 140, 198, 223, 266n27
Prabhu 145
Prakash, Satya 221
Praja Rajyam Party xv, xvii, 23, 69, 74, 239, 267n31
Pranam Khareedu 25, 83, 87, 256n7
Prasad, Arun 217
prekshaka sanghalu (viewers' associations) 8
Premikudu 201
Preminchukundam Raa 223
Propaganda film xix–xx
Prasad, M. Madhava xviii, xix, xxi, xxv–xxvii, 44, 46, 75–6, 88, 110, 129, 134, 162, 177, 216, 257n16, 261n4, 264n4, 265n20
aesthetic of mobilization 120–1
cine-politics 107
fan bhakti 30–1, 130
fragment B 226
Prasad, Rajendra 81, 90

Rachana 220
Radhakrishnan, Ratheesh 247n1
Radhika 98
Raiders of the Lost Ark 89
Raitu Bidda (Gudavalli Ramabrahmam 1939)
Raitu Bidda (B.A. Subba Rao 1971) 83
Raj, Prakash 221, 225, 230, 233
Raja Sulochana 146
Rajadhyaksha, Ashish 37
on Bollywood xxvi, xxvii, 127, 190
on spectatorial rights 39–40, 41
Rajasekhar (film actor) 68, 248n9

Rajasekhar, Devineni (Nehru) 20–2, 249n18
Rajkumar xviii, xix, xx, 218, 265n21
Ram Aur Shyam 145
Rambha 175, 212, 220
Ramya Krishna 174
Ramudu Bheemudu 145
Ranga Rao, Madala 256n8
Raghavendra Rao, K. 78, 85, 86, 265n17
Rajnikant xvii, xxix, 65, 78, 88, 149, 253n50
Rama Rao, N.T. (Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao, NTR) 19, 25, 26, 36, 54, 88, 96, 101, 107, 112, 145, 146, 151, 190, 191, 217, 231, 247n2&3, 256n3&5, 257n13, 259n27, 265n21
  and film industry xxiv, xxvii, xxviii, xxix, xxx, 78–86, 94, 194–6, 218, 238
  Nandamuri dynasty 10
  in politics xv, xvi, xvii, xviii, xix, xx, xxv, 9, 15, 16, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22, 74, 106, 121, 215, 240, 248n10&12, 253n50, 264n4, 267n26
Rama Rao Jr., NT (Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao Jr, NTR Jr.) 10, 22, 36, 186, 227, 240
Ramachandra Rao, P.N. 179
Ramachandran, M.G. (MGR) xvii, xx, xxi, 3, 8, 9, 145, 218
Ramakrishna, Kodi 94, 104
Ramalingaiah, Allu 19, 146, 254
Ramana 230
Ramanaidu, Daggubati 23, 186, 187, 201, 219–20
Ramcharan Tej, K. 10, 22, 25, 63, 217
Ramoji Film City 219, 266n22
Ramoji Rao, Ch. 186, 187, 210, 219
Ranga, Vangaveeti Mohan 18, 21–5, 55
Rao, Chalapathy 257n14
Rao, Hari Purushottam 56
Rao, Kasivisweswara 257n15
Rao, Rao Gopal 87, 90, 97, 99, 148, 150
Rao, Siva Nageswara 201
Rashtra Chiranjeevi Yuvatha *see* State Wide Chiranjeevi Youth Welfare Association
Rathnam, Mani 191, 197, 226, 261n13, 264n5
Rawal, Paresh 220
Rawat, Pradeep 233
Ray, Rabindra 257n9
Rayalaseema
  faction/factionists of 223, 266n27
  filmic representation of 192, 223–7, 231
Rayalaseema Ramanna Chaudhury 95–6, 100
Reception Studies 4, 5
recording dance 25, 159, 164, 249n25
red film 258n24
Reddy caste xxiv, 186, 261n13, 266n27
Reddy, A. Kodandarami 94
Reddy, S.V. Krishna 35, 201
Reddy, B. Nagi 151
Reddy, Y.S. Rajasekhar 266n27
Reddy, T. Subbirami 157
remakes 33, 64, 78, 82, 85, 121, 145, 193, 211, 214, 216, 219, 228, 230, 256n3, 260n8, 266n25
  unauthorized copies 89, 97, 191
Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee 1927–28 162
Reshmi 87
Rickshawvodu 32, 154, 210, 259n27
Rishi, Mukesh 232
Roja 226
Roja 111, 154
Roja Muthaiah Research Library 251n40

Roopavani 8, 252n42
Rowdy/rowdy-sheeter 55–6, 260n5
-citizen/figure of excess 129–56, 217
and masculinity 112, 147, 150
Screen rowdy xxix, xxx, 33, 92, 93, 114, 173, 180, 202, 185, 188, 210, 211, 214–15
Rowdy Alludu 142
Rudraveena 204–8, 267n31

Saakshi 202
Sainikudu 13
Sagara Sangamam 203, 204
Samarasimha Reddy 223, 227, 257n30
Sankarabharanam 203–4, 265n13
Sarada 148
Sarai New Media Initiative xxv
Sardar Paparayudu 84
Sastry, K.N.T. 83, 262n8
Satte Pe Satta 258n23
Satyanarayana 146, 206, 257n13
Satyanarayana, E.V.V. 38, 179, 217
Seeta Ramulu 260n9
Sekhar, Yalamanchi 16, 264n6
Sen, Kunal 262n11
sentiment
family/ladies 33, 119, 197, 214, 217
sister 216–18
Sex films 168, 262n12,
Shah Rukh Khan 7, 127–8
Shankar Dada M.B.B.S. 214
Shankar Dada Zindabad 214, 228
Shavukaru 83
Shinde, Saiyaji 230
Shrimadvirat Veerabrahmendra Swami Charitra 82
sidekick
as fan 236
'Silk' Smita 98
Simham Navvindi 82
Siri Siri Muvva 203
Sisindri 201
sister-sentiment/sister-love 216–18, 265n20
Sitara (film magazine) 171, 186, 262n12
Siva, Muppalaneni 201
Sivaji 253n50
Sivaji (film actor) 111, 226
Sivathamby, K. xx, 4, 40–1, 251n39
Sivudu Sivudu Sivudu 89
slab system (entertainment tax) 80–1, 195–6
Sobhan Babu 9, 20, 247n3, 260n7
social film 75–7, 145
Somayajulu 111, 152
Soundarya 222
S.P. Parasuram 33, 98
spectator xviii, xxix, 4–5, 28, 39–40, 74
credulous 64, 129, 158–83, 192, 208, 237–40, 254n57, 255n58
expectation/investment/pleasure of xxv, 34, 63, 77
fan- 104, 109, 125–6, 183, 185, 236, 238, 255n59
and star 86, 91, 93, 94–103
willing 37, 105–28, 229, 232
Sri Anjaneyam 217
Sri Sri (Srirangam Srinivasa Rao) 230, 267n31
on obscenity 165
Sri Kanakamahalakshmi Recording Dance Troupe 250n25
Sri Srisaila Bhrambhika Kataksham 105
Sridevi 33, 192, 260n8
Srihari, Gudipoodi 80, 157, 158, 170–1, 172, 175, 189, 195, 196, 214, 247n4, 256n4
Srikakulam uprising 15, 84
Srinivas, Lakshmi 36

Srinivas, Ravi and Sundar Kaali 265n19
Srinivas Rao, Bhimaneni 193
Srinivas Rao, Kota 110, 174
Srinivas Rao, Singeetham 94, 179
Sriram, L.B. 233
Stacey, Jackie 5
star
  double existence of 101–2, 136, 143–52, 181, 223
  double roles of 112, 181, 214, 259n27
south Indian xviii–xix, xxi, xxx, 3, 63, 107, 121, 216–18, 265n21
spectatorial investment in 99, 147, 232
  -politician xx, xxii, xxiv, xxvii, 4, 17, 107, 129–30, 140, 159, 190, 241
  as transcendental figure 141, 202, 238
STAR Television 167, 187
State Wide Chiranjeevi Youth Welfare Association (SWCYWA)/ Rashtra Chiranjeevi Yuvatha/ State Chiranjeevi Youth 11, 58, 60, 67–8, 167, 185, 187, 248n5
Stalin 22, 24, 215, 217, 228, 231, 232–8, 267n34
State Rowdy 100, 142, 148–9, 157, 178, 180
Stuartpuram Police Station 89
subaltern 41
  groups 16, 103
  resistance 57
  authenticity of star's roles as xix, 88, 89, 93, 142–4, 149, 181, 214, 215
  sovereignty 30–1
Subba Rao, Adurthi 101, 144, 202
Subhalekha 82, 203, 208
Subramaniam, A.V.S. 98, 181
substitution xxvii
Sudhakar 212
Suhasini 90
Sujata 111
Sumalata 91, 97
Suman 60, 234, 235, 253n52
Sunil 234, 235–6
Suresh Productions 219
Suri, Sekhar 191
Sun Telelvision 200
Subhalekha 82, 203, 208
Superman 191
Suryavamsam 193
Swayamkrushi 58, 204–8

Tagore 126, 215, 228–32, 237
Tajmahal 201
Talli Telangana Party 264n7
Tarakaratna, Nandamuri 10
Tara Sitara 186, 263n18
Taser Ghar 145
Tatamma Kala 82
Telangana 10, 19, 84
  movement for separate state 15, 248n11
  film industry in 197–9, 258n24, 264n6
Telangana Rashtra Samiti 198, 264n7
Telugu Desam Party (TDP) xvii, xviii, 16, 17, 20, 21, 22, 23, 27, 55, 78, 95, 157, 186, 223, 240, 249n20, 260n2, 263n18
television xxiv, xxv, xxvi, 4, 38, 160, 170, 190, 199, 210, 229
  live telecast xv, xvi, 109, 231, 233–5,
  cable and satellite xxi, 31, 166, 168, 200, 219, 240, 250n27, 264n9
Thammudu 217
Tharu, Susie 132, 154, 166

Thene Manasulu 202
Teneteega 164, 168
Tirupathi xv, xvi, 6, 12, 14, 32, 33, 141, 250n29, 255n60

Upadhaya, Carol 261n5
Usha Kiron Movies 219

vamp
  figures on screen 98, 110, 112, 142, 147, 262n8
Vamsa Vriksham 203
Vamsy 250n25
Vamsy, Krishna 210
Varaprasad, Devi 157
Varasudu 38
Varma, Ram Gopal 191–3, 197
Vasudevan, Ravi 184–5, 255n58, 263n17
Venkata Rao, I. 16
Venkatesh 186, 204, 210, 219
  fans 23
Venkateswara Rao, Gummadi 151, 152
verisimilitude 105, 149
Vidyasagar Rao, Ch. 186
Vijayashanti 90, 92, 143, 205, 254n56
  fans 26, 27
  and female vigilante film 179, 258n19, 259n25
  Lady Superstar 12, 95
  Osey Ramulamma 199
  in politics 264n7
Vijayawada
  fans 7, 9, 13, 20–4, 25, 55, 56
  film distribution in 194
  filmic representation of 261n11

Vijay Chander 111
Vijay Kumar 222
Vijaykanth 230
Vinayak, V.V. 230
VIRASAM (Viplava Rachayitala Sangham/Revolutionary Writers' Association) 164
Visakhapatnam/Vizag 10, 251n36, 252n42
Vishwanath, K. 202–9, 265n15
Vishwanath, Vani 150
Vitali, Valentina 194

Willemen, Paul xxvi, 5, 28–9, 77, 104, 183
women's movement xviii, 15

Yadav, Lalu Prasad xxv, 261n12
Yadav, Yogendra 140
Yama Gola 78, 84, 146
Yamakinkarudu 82, 89
Yamudiki Mogudu 146–7, 260n7
Yandamuri, Veerendranath 82, 89, 257n17
youth film 218, 264n5
Yugandhar 256n3

Zanjeer 256n3
Zaveri, Angela 222

Cont'd from front flap

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